

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ALL OF THE
ROUGH SLEEPERS, INDOORS AND OUT.

GIVE THEM A BUCK OR FIVE WHEN YOU SEE
THEM.

EASTERN SPAN

A novel
by Rick Paulas

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN IN OAKLAND, CALIF.
BETWEEN JANUARY 1ST, 2017 AND APRIL 27TH,
2019.

MAP BY TRAVIS TARR.

Part I

Caveat Emptor



BY S. FERNÁNDEZ.

Chapter One

NEVER go to the city, they say.

Hear that the first few times, and it's a statement so broad in its interpretations it has no power. It comes across as a "chip on the shoulder" moment of the jealous and misguided, the lazy and complacent. But it's not, no sir, not at all. What they say is true. Never go to the city. Because nothing good ever happens there.

Evidence of this fact slumps before you on the Transbay BART at 4:30 in the morning.

Now, before you jump the gun to point out the factual inaccuracy of the BART's hours of operation, proof your author isn't quite as clever as she thinks she is in disguising her lack of local bonafides, you're gonna have to trust me on this.

It is indeed 4:30 on a Thursday morning on a running and populated, however sparsely, BART train. And behold before you, this scrawny-ass white dude.

He looks to be between a "rough" 31 years old or a "high-class living" 45, and he's lean-sleeping at an awkward angle in a row of hard, blue plastic, his twig legs curled into the dimples of the seat's butt dents. His face is flattened against

the glass, and a drop of spittle hangs from his mouth, so that between the real thing and its fogged reflection the tableau looks to be decorated by a sloppy, glistening letter U.

No point in beating around the bush:

This guy's our hero.

Milo Arnold, but he goes by "Pug."

It's a nickname he's had since the fifth grade when his then-best friend brought his dog to school and the resemblance was striking.

Hear the man, he snores like an asshole. It rattles the cold windowpanes and drowns out the whoosing sound of the train car. Through a tear in his stained jeans you can make out the splotchy red patch of a newly-skinned knee. See the bruises on his elbows, smell the liquor on his breath.

Not pretty to start with, that's for sure, but the cuts, bruises, and puffed eyes are recent additions.

His night had started out fine enough. He'd made it into the city an hour early to re-obtain the bicycle of one Mr. Winston Gloss, a first-time "client" he'd been put in touch with through a friend of a friend of a friend. Gloss was a techie import who'd had his ultra-lightweight, carbon-framed road bike stolen after he'd idiotically left it locked up—get this: running the chain through only his wheels, and not the frame itself—overnight in the Mission. Police rightfully laughed him out of their precinct, so Gloss turned to his buddy Rafael, who knew Amber, who knew Pug, who did this sort of thing for a modest fee.

A few deftly worded internet searches and phone calls later and a meeting was set up for Gloss to ostensibly buy his own bike back. But Pug offered to do him one better and do the deal himself while using "proven intimidation tactics," to skip the payment part entirely, with Pug taking a higher percentage. Gloss just wanted the bike back, but dollars saved were dollars earned, so the approval came swift.

The plan was simple: Drive his Geo Metro into the city, meet the thief at Capp and 17th, feign calling radio back-up to swarm and arrest the perp, watch him scurry off, pop the recovered hot wheels into his trunk, drop it back at Winston's, get paid. Simple, easy way to make the week's funds.

A minor civic complication emerged this particular

Friday night, the long-planned switch from the old Bay Bridge to the new, necessitating a closing of the eastern span from 8 p.m. that Wednesday through the weekend. To satisfy the populace's transportation needs, the city was running BART 24/7 during the closure, but to Pug, who'd easily be safe back in Oakland by the time of the shut down, that'd all be irrelevant.

Pug told the crook six o'clock and got there early to scout the location from the confines of the Uptown, a dive kiddie-corner to the meet. He climbed on a stool and ordered a pint.

"Impending doom is coming," leaned a bald, goatee'd and pockmarked stranger into Pug's personal bubble. "Beware signs of its approach. For example..." The stranger nodded to the jukebox, a stout job with about a hundred albums to flip through.

"Once that becomes a wireless monolith, with no physical albums, where every recorded song spanning God's creation can be selected from the comfort of one's own thumbs, it's all over, man."

With a bombastic shake of his head to stress his point, the stranger twirled his turquoise feather boa through a puddle on the bar and tipped off his stool into Pug's lap. Pug hoisted the drunk back onto the bartop's smooth edge, downed his own glass, and ordered one more. Halfway through, the thief texted that he was ready for the swap.

"Mind watching this?" he asked the slumbering Luddite in the boa, dropping a coaster on top his glass in case the message didn't get through. He went outside and waited for his bar-eyes to adjust to the fading sunlight. Across the street he saw a kid in his late teens rocking nervously, holding the bike in question. Pug crossed the street and took out his phone.

"The man with the bike?"

"The man with the money?"

"Something like that," Pug said, and brought his phone up to his mouth like some mimed walkie-talkie. "Backup, backup, 8-2-4-1, backup!"

The kid dropped the bike and ran up 17th into the ether of pedestrian traffic. Easy money, thought Pug, until he tried to roll the bike back to his car and it only traveled half

the length of a wheel before slamming to a halt. The dick-head thief had stuck a U-lock in the tire, making it more paperweight than proper vehicle.

Pug carried it the two blocks to where he'd lucked into a parking spot, but when he got there, the spot had been taken by something other than his "vintage" 2000 auburn Geo Metro. He checked the street signs for the city's convoluted tow traps: all clear. He fumbled in his pockets for his keys: gone. He scanned the pavement for clues: turquoise feathers littered the ground.

Mother. Fucker.

Pug went back to the bar to call SFPD to report the theft, then had three or four more rounds waiting for a reply which never came, not that he would've expected it. The closing time brights flickered on and he stumbled to the 16th Street BART, that damn bike over his shoulder.

His knee gave out on the final set of subterranean stairs and he tumbled down the rest. Metallic screeches in the transit cavern. Pummeled knees, skinned elbows, bent rims. He lurched into the next train and passed out against the cool window glass.

Two or three rides back and forth across the bay later, he was finally woken by an ancient Black man with grey stubble on his chin. He wore an old, wrinkled suit and shook a paper cup. Inside, coins rattles against coins.

He poked Pug in the arm, and when no response came, he poked again.

"Fucking hell, man!" said Pug.

"I have four quarters," the suited man said. "Have a dollar I can trade them for?"

Pug wiped his eye and, surprising even himself, pulled out a crumpled bill from his pocket. He made the trade, and after one perfect beat, the old man spoke again.

"Got any change you can spare?" he deadpanned.

Pug smirked at the hustle and flipped two quarters to the old man.

"All I got, I'm afraid."

The old man tipped the rim of his hat and walked off.

Behind him, Pug saw the massive white cranes of the Oakland harbor slide into view like giant, pale sentinels providing cover to those returning home.

He exited at 19th Street and carried the shithead's bike up the stairs and all the way back to his apartment, cursing the night he'd just had, blissfully unaware of the shitshow yet to come.



BY JESSICA WASSIL.

Chapter Two

PUG WOKE the next afternoon with that kind of hang-over you shake off in your 20s, but feels like wading through invisible waves of viscous slosh as soon as you hit your 30s. He peeled the sweated-through sheet off his bare body, unveiling what could maybe be best described as a skeleton with a gut. He rolled off his single mattress, tucked in the corner of his studio apartment and onto the dirty red Persian rug he'd received as payment for some previous caper. He'd forgotten which.

He flicked on his phone. Fourteen messages, one from Tommy, the others from Gloss. Always a stickler for professionalism, Pug called his client back first.

"Didn't go as planned," he told Gloss, eyeing the U-lock that kept the bike in stasis. "The punk ran off soon as I got there and took the bike with him."

Pug grimaced as he slid a clear plastic bin out from under his desk. He withdrew a handsaw, knife, wrench, and hammer, silently set them on the room's faux wood vinyl floor, and reached back in for a now-revealed electric drill. He plugged it into his wall socket under the wispy dark stain from an electrical fire set seven or eight tenants ago.

“But I saw his face, so I’m APB-in’ my crew soon as I hang up this call.” The drill began to whirl. “You still owe me my retainer,” Pug shouted, and the lock clattered to the floor. “I take Paypal.” Click.

He rolled the freed bike on his floor, and it made a clawing scratch as the bent rear wheel rim rubbed against the back stays, then stuck. He set the bike down and hammered the rim into a dented sort of smooth, then picked it up and tested it again. This time the back wheel moved like a drunk on a tightrope but it was enough to pass through the frame, and therefore, it technically worked.

Pug staggered to the bathroom and drank straight from the spigot of his low-power faucet. He wiped the crust from his eyelids, deodorized, threw on a white t-shirt that read NAZI PUNKS FUCK OFF!!, and shouldered on his black jean jacket through painful aches from the previous night’s fall. He hoisted the bike onto his shoulder, kicked open his laminate front door, and lit a cigarette in the stairwell. He jerked down the three flights, exited past an information kiosk about the building’s new ownership group, and staggered out the front door, past some recent scaffolding and onto the street. It’s true what they say about remembering how to ride a bike.

He took Telegraph south past the new cocktail joints encroaching on Cafe Van Kleeef’s territory to where it smacked into Broadway near the seeming indefinite renovation. He passed the 12th Street BART station, the downtown Marriott, the Smart & Final, finally arrived at the blocky futuristic building of the OPD, like a looming chaperone next to the highway, metallic and cold like something out of Robocop. He hopped off the bike in mid-pedal and let his cigarette fall from his mouth as he slipped through the station doors.

“You know, you’re supposed to run away from the cops when you steal something, Pug,” said Frank Harris.

Blonde, blue-eyed, chiseled chin, a tanned tinge of sunlight singe on his beige skin, but a tad too short to be taken seriously, like someone’d lopped a foot and a half off the “perfect” mold. They’d met in high school Chem.

“Can I just, like, leave this here? For you to keep an eye on?” Pug said as he tipped the bike against the foyer

wall. "I'm sure that's completely normal and fine and perfect protocol."

"Not at all, nope, not one bit," Frank said, but Pug had already disappeared through the metal detectors.

He went to the property theft department and told the drowsy clerk behind the rage-proof plastic that he wanted to report his car stolen. He was given a stone-faced "sorry to hear that" and a clipboard, so he sat his ass down and started filling in the blanks. Frank loitered nearby.

"Sorry to say, but the city ain't our beat," Frank said. "If you haven't noticed, we're an entirely different place altogether on this side. A whole different city. Have our own mayor, even."

"I'll have you know, I've already alerted those authorities, highly professional ones befitting the great municipality in which they reside," Pug said without looking up. "But have to cover my bases in this hamlet, too."

"Normally, I'd say that's smart," Frank said. "But I've seen your car, Pug. That wouldn't make it over the bridge."

"Underestimate The Beast at your peril," Pug muttered, and signed the bottom of the report.

He stuffed it under the glass with a wink at the clerk who rolled her eyes, turned around, and there was April, costumed in the societal disguise that let her transcend from the squats of a DIY gutter punk show into the public defender's office: sharp suit, black heels, hair pulled back into a power bun, glasses, clipboard, stern look. Pug had met her years ago while a juror on one of her boss' cases, their subsequent friendship evidence enough that you can't trust the system.

She gave his face the once-over with a few clicks of her tongue.

"I'd say you look like shit, Pug," she said. "But mine have been looking pretty good lately. Green smoothies been doing the trick."

"That's lovely to hear," Pug said.

"What the fuck happened to your face?"

"I think that's just, like, how he looks," Frank stage-whispered.

"Think I look bad, you should see the set of stairs," Pug said to no response. "Never mind all that. I was just coming to find you. They took my car, kinking my plans to be the

best damn Uber driver you'd ever seen, so now I need some cash."

"Now?" Frank said. "As opposed to when else exactly?"

Pug ignored him.

"Got anything?" he asked April.

She did.

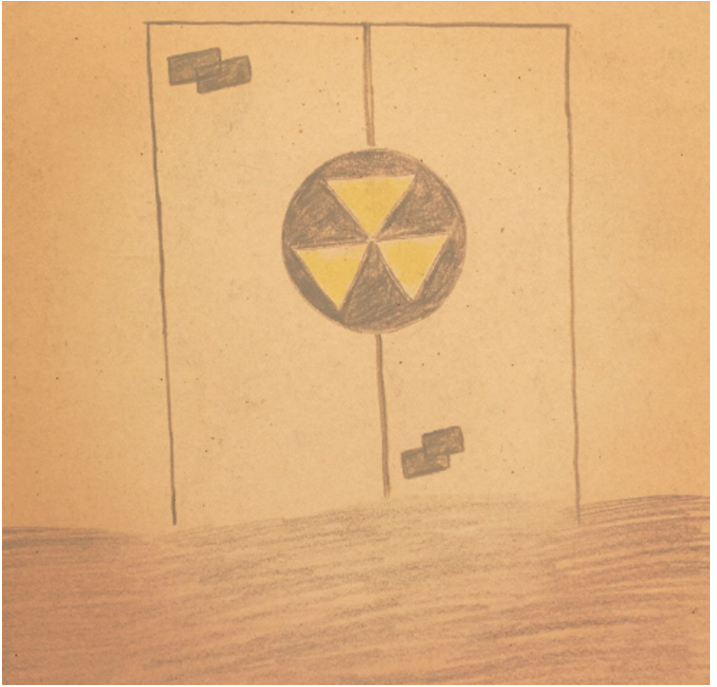
The case came in the night before. A man named Royce Grace—"harsh across the tongue," Pug noted—had gone to the home of his mom's landlord, a man named Gardner. He'd rung the doorbell, introduced himself with a handshake, and then knocked the ever-living shit out of him. Neighbors got there and held Royce back, who then plopped himself down and waited for the cops.

"Landlord checked himself out of the hospital this morning, and I need a statement from him," April said. "Standard stuff. Record it, bring it, we'll cut you a check."

Pug took her handheld recorder, hopped on his bike, and rode back up Telegraph, through that triangular patch outside City Hall named after Frank Ogawa or Oscar Grant, depending on one's own order of justice. Standing on the top step of the carved-out amphitheater, a white man with a gray ponytail preached into his bullhorn about something or other to stoned nods and encouraging shouts from his sparse crowd. Pug couldn't make the sermon out.

He took San Pablo to Grand to Poplar, into the so-called highway-created "bullseye" of properties that realtors had begun to salivate themselves dry over, and tossed his bike onto the lawn of that brusied landlord he was there to see.

He knocked once, twice on the metal grate outside the door, glanced over his shoulder to surveil his bike, and turned back to face the twin round voids of shotgun barrels. In a retaliatory response of a sort, Pug let a nervous fart waft through his jeans.



BY MICHELLE NOVAK.

Chapter Three

“DAMN, was that you?” winced the bald Black man with the shotgun, and scrunched his nose at the odious smell. He twisted his head with a cringe of confusion and the thick flesh on the back of his neck bunched into ripples. “Man, you shit yourself?”

“I promise it’s worse over here,” Pug said. “Sorry, but kinda your fault for answering your door with that boomstick.”

The man lowered the gun and clasped a free hand over his nose. The skin around his eyes cracked into wrinkles and a hissing laugh came through his shut teeth. “That’ll wake you up for damn sure,” he said, wiping away tear-filled eyes, and Pug fully made out the battered, bruised face of Mr. Gardner. “What can I do for you?”

“Here about yesterday,” Pug said. “I’m from the public defender’s office, who’s repping a Mr. Royce Grace.”

“Fuck that guy.”

“I can appreciate that,” Pug said. He pulled out the recorder and the red light flicked on. “Just here to collect a statement.”

“Don’t got much to add on top of what I already told the cops,” Gardner said. “Don’t even know if I should be talking

to you.”

“Up to you,” Pug said. “I’m here if you wa—”

“So this asshole knocked on my door,” Gardner interrupted, “introduced his psychotic ass, and started whoopin’ mine.”

“How was he acting?” Pug said. “What was he saying?”

“Nah, man,” Gardner shook his head. “Sorry you came all the way over here, but this ain’t my first time with your type. Anything I say’s gonna help his case, and I want whatever settlement’s coming.”

“Fair enough,” Pug said.

“What gets to me though is—listen, I’ve been beaten plenty before,” Gardner said. “Deserved most. But this one was meant for someone else.”

Gardner told it all for the tape. He’d grown up in the area, “forty years in this damn house,” and threw some extra money he’d saved into some property “just like pops said.” One investment was a two-story four-plex in Temescal, now considered hip, “though it wasn’t considered such when I bought it.” The only tenant that came with the place was on the first floor, around back: the then 57-year-old Lydia Grace, Royce’s mom.

“Great lady, no complaints,” Gardner’s voice issued from the recorder into the back smoking section of the red-dimmed Ruby Room. It was the quiet empty before downtown’s civic working force streamed in for happy hour. April took notes, Pug slurped from a cheap can.

“I had no plans to sell the joint, but when they offered what they did a few months back, I had to take it,” Gardner had said. “The headache of dealing with tenants is worth only so much. So they, not me, evicted that nice, old lady. Not me. Not me. I feel for her, I do, but I didn’t deserve no beating.”

Pug pressed stop and April passed an envelope holding a check, along with a bonus off-the-books twenty. “This round’s on the house, too,” she said.

“If I’d known that, I would’ve ordered something fancier,” Pug said. “What happens now?”

“Gonna be hell proving self-defense when the guy walks up to the house of the person he assaults,” she said. “But that’s what Royce is going for. He’s staying in jail until this

gets resolved just to prove a point. Pride is one powerful emotion.”

“Know who bought the place?”

“Trying to figure that out,” she said. “I’ll let you know if we have anything else.”

Pug sipped and finally texted Tommy back, who said he was playing a show later that night at the Fallout Shelter, an art collective in the warehouse grid in West Oakland known as Ghost Town.

“What’s your friend play?” asked April.

“Drums.”

“Of course,” she said. “Never short on drummers around here.”

April downed her whiskey shot and spread her notes across the pool table. Pug knew her niceties were over. He crept away, topped off his beer with a Jameson shot on the way out, and rubbed his eyes until the faux rock wall behind the bar came back into focus. He exited into the afternoon sun and biked to his apartment to nap off his day drunkenness. After waking up with a freezer burn-toughened microwave burrito, he changed his clothes and rode to the show.

It was called the Fallout Shelter because of its nuclear-era theme: mushroom cloud black-light paintings, steel replicas of bombs hanging from the rafters, a piercing detonation countdown going off if one loiters in the bathroom too long, shit like that. Pug walked through the front double doors, across which a huge bisected yellow hazard symbol was painted, and threw a five into the donations bucket.

He grabbed a lukewarm Tecate and waded into the crowd. On stage was a gal with green highlights who side-eyed the loud chatterers as she banshee-sang over the feedback of her guitar. Pug found Tommy and hugged him hello.

“Harriet around?” Pug asked Tommy, wearing his standard flat-brimmed A’s hat which, with similarities in facial hair and skin color, made him look like a furrier version of Rickey Henderson.

“Should be,” Tommy said. “She’s living here now.”

“Shit. What happened?”

“Ask yourself, Romeo.”

Tommy chinned into the crowd and Pug turned to see

Harriet gymnastically navigating toward them, her foamy red plastic cup leading the way. Her shoulder-length light purple hair was held in a ponytail, exposing twin six-gauge plugs in her ears that she'd carved out of coconut wood. She smiled at Pug in a sort of slow motion kind of way.

The guitar fuzz clicked off and the show organizer took the mic. "Thanks for coming," she said. "These shows keep this space open and a roof over our heads, so give us some fucking money when we pass the hat."

Next on the docket was the main event, a royal rumble where nine dudes tried to muscle each other out of the makeshift "ring," really just the stage with drooping ropes enclosing it. Last person left inside took home a quarter of the donations. This month's contestants were the standard assortment of shaved heads and rattails, punks with cut lips and knuckle scuffs. They tossed jackets to friends and twisted in warm-up stretches.

One participant stood dead still in the ring's center. His eyes were closed with a meditative calm but his nostrils flared as if tracking the movements of his competitors. He was a foot taller than the rest of the field, his head void of any hair. His pale biceps held twin tattoos of perfect black rectangles that, under the spotlights, faded enough to reveal the sharp swastikas hidden beneath the cover-up attempt.

"Who's that?" Pug asked.

"Spike," Tommy replied. "Mean dude. Do anything for a buck."

The announcer went over the rules and rang the bell. Slaps and grunts were overwhelmed by the crowd's shouts and cheers. It was over in about thirty seconds, half the contestants laid out nearly unconscious, the other half smartly exiting the ring of their own accord.

Standing alone was Spike, who wiped a lone sweat droplet from his forehead. He grabbed the envelope, flipped through his earnings, tucked it into his back pocket, and left the building.

Moments later, the cops kicked in the door, and Pug instantly remembered the warrant for Tommy's arrest.



BY DARRYL JONES.

Chapter Four

A STANDING WARRANT for Tommy Riles had been in the system since he'd been caught by a surveillance camera smashing up a Wells Fargo window during Occupy. Tommy thought he was in the clear, but when letters with OPD return addresses started showing up, he stayed with an out-of-town cousin until the negative atmosphere surrounding the occupation had dissipated. When he returned, he was low on the city's enemies list, but still in the system. Get pulled over for blowing a stop sign, or stopped on a random ID check at a party bust, and he'd be crashing in a dank jail cell for a few nights. As such, the line of partygoers funneling out to bathe in the reds and blues was bad news.

Harriet knew the score, so she pulled Tommy and Pug up the foil-covered staircase onto the landing, the lair of low-rent crash pads. She twirled the combo of the padlock, retrieved it with a flick of her wrist, and pushed her door forward into the darkness. She flipped a switch and a wall projector launched pinholes of light onto the ceiling and walls, mimicking the constellations obscured by the atmospheric haze that covers the Bay.

"Came with the room," she apologized.

Shouts from the cops hunting the last few revelers bounced through the foil tunnel and up the stairs. Harriet gently clicked her door in its frame, quietly pushed the bolt, grabbed a wooden chair from her desk, and set it next to the bookshelf.

“But it’s not all bad,” she said. “Room came with this too.”

She stepped on the chair, then onto the bookshelf’s middle plank, and pushed a trapdoor in the ceiling that opened up to the night sky. The three hoisted themselves to the roof, and Pug carefully set down the trap as the cops kicked in Harriet’s bedroom door. They held their breath until the cops loudly “cleared” the room and then got to moving.

After jumping a short gap to the next building, they climbed down the fire escape, circled around to Tommy’s yellow Camaro, and crept away in neutral, away from the flashing lights to an acid jazz soundtrack from the KALX night shift.

“Good news is I don’t have much,” Harriet said. “So, next move’s gonna be a cinch.”

They hopped on the 580 East, swerved down the ramp at Grand, and into the glittering lights from the Grand Lake theater marquee. They diagonaled into a spot and jaywalked into the green neon coming from the rustic dive bar hugged by an apartment building. One at a time, they walked into The Alley.

The trio ducked into the smaller, interior shack that enclosed the bar proper, the final Russian nesting doll where the booze was held. They grabbed a few bottles. On the tiny TV perched up in the corner came the words of the city spokesman, saying they were ahead of schedule for the opening of the new bridge. Tommy clinked Pug’s bottle with his own, and Rod Dibble, who was perched at the piano as always, added his twinkles as maestro to the congregation of pitch-perfect karaoke drunks around him. They passed the mic in their half-circle, singing the old standards as best they could, the laminated lyric book helping them along when they needed it. From a side booth, a soft horn accented the performance.

Tommy, Pug, and Harriet sequestered themselves in a back booth and ordered a round of steak sandwiches from the blonde waiter with an emo haircut. They were soon

joined by other refugees from Fallout.

“Never heard of Fallout getting busted before,” Tommy said.

“Thinkin’ I’ll need a place to crash,” Harriet said. “Any takers? I don’t smell that bad.”

“Can’t,” said a new addition to the booth they all called Crumble. “Landlord’s keeping an eye on all my comings and goings.”

“Crashing on my brother’s couch myself,” said Devon, another new entry to the scene, a hefty white guy with an expansive neck beard and falsetto voice. “Sorry.”

“The floor next to my bed’s open,” Pug offered.

“Something’s off,” Tommy said. “Since when’s OPD in the business of bustin’ warehouse shows?”

He grabbed at the wall and tore down an old business card that’d been stapled there next to the dozens of others. Tommy examined its brown tint, lingering evidence from that blessed time not so long ago when smoking indoors was kosher, and he frisbee’d it past the glowing ATM and into the bar proper. It pinged off the head of a tiny punk with wiry hair, who unstuck it from the ground, read the name of some defunct logistics company, then triangulated to locate whoever had flung the card. When he found Pug, his eyes widened.

“Shit, you reeled in Tor,” Pug snickered to Tommy as Tor the tiny punk came sauntering over.

“I was just thinking about you,” Tor said, or croaked out through his smoke-ravaged cords at least, looking at Pug. “Got a caper.”

“Let me save you time and just say no,” Pug said.

“Hear me out,” Tor pled. “As a legitimate businessman.”

“Fine,” Pug said. “Step into the ol’ office, as they say.”

Pug picked up his steak sandwich and led Tor to The Alley’s front booth nearest the entrance, an odd, triangular constructional quirk that felt more outside than in. Pug sidled into the seat nearest the window, laid back, and felt the outside cold through the wooden wall. The red neon from a sign announcing “cocktails” gave him a radioactive halo. From the piano, Dibble’s graceful voice burst into the mic, first aiding and then obliterating a poor soul who was biffing his karaoke selection.

“It’s like this,” Tor said from the side of his mouth. “A friend trims for his cousin every few months. The cuz locks ‘em in the basement all weekend ‘til they’re done. They got a bathroom, a few beds, TV, and he orders ‘em pizzas. He pays a bunch, but they can’t leave ‘til the job’s done. His way of security. Dude’s a suspicious shit. Anyway, check this.”

Tor glanced to check for eavesdroppers and leaned over the wooden table. His raw fingers traced the graffiti that’d been carved into the wood long ago, like it was some secret Braille that only he knew.

“Cuz keeps a window propped open. Got to ventilate the place,” he said. “The window leads to this alleyway. And the window’s just big enough to, say, escort out a few bags of trimmed, hella dank cush.”

“Let me stop you,” Pug said. “I don’t deal.”

“Don’t have to, Mr. Holier Than Thou.”

“Where’s the trim place?”

“The Sunset,” Tor said. “Out in the city.”

“Nah, man,” Pug said. “Nothing good happens there.”

“Think of it like this—”

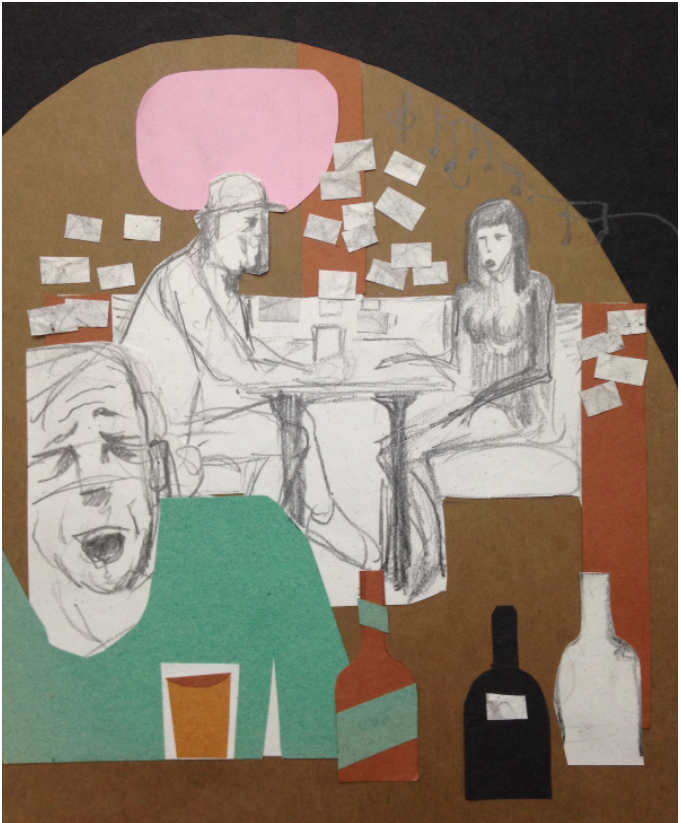
“Let me do this instead,” Pug said, looking past Tor to the ancient ad for Lucky Lager, just below the bar’s decorative stuffed owl. “I’m gonna grab us some beers, and when I come back, here to my booth, I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Pug lunged past Tor with a long step to the floor, hung a right to the bar, and ordered a Grapefruit IPA for himself and a PBR for Tor.

“Make it one more of the good one,” said that voice Pug thought he’d heard the last of, years and years ago. “Been awhile, Milo.”

Pug turned and she was right.

It sure had.



BY MADS LUDVIGSEN.

Chapter Five

SPEND AS MANY YEARS AS I HAVE in this world, and you realize that sweeping generalizations and stereotypes are only the refuge of the confused trying to hide their own sorry state. As such, they're not at all my favored manner of expression. Some kind of cowardice about them. But in this one particular case, I'm gonna make an exception:

Everybody's living with a landmine.

Maybe it's a moment of indiscretion. Or a zig when you should've zagged that sends you down a winding path ending in a dead end. Or exposure to chemicals or bad habits that'll turn back up as inoperable tumors or failing organs. And sometimes, most of the times now that I think about it, those landmines are people.

Those people from your past, former loves, official or otherwise, that fill you with fear of their eventual reemergence into your life. Because if they do make a reappearance, they have the power to change your entire world. The people who still, even after all this time gone by, can walk in through those doors gentle as a kiss and ask you to leave it all behind, all those responsibilities, relationships, and truths. And you know, but maybe only admit after a drink or two, that you

would leave it behind, you'd be out the door before they even finished making their case. That's the kind of power these walking, talking unexploded ordinances have over you. Put another way, these are the people that all those songs are written about.

For our hero Pug, that landmine was this new woman at the bar, someone who with a simple whispered request could change it all. Her name was Mercia Jones, and, as she said, it'd been awhile.

"It sure has," Pug smiled. "Can't say I had you penciled into my night."

He registered the ways time had worked on her since they last met, at that mutual friend's birthday-slash-going-away backyard barbecue party out in Fruitvale. By that point, it'd been a few months of last calls then night sobs after she'd ended it, though the wound back then had still felt as fresh as day one. It was later that week that she told him she was finally picking up for good and moving south to L.A.

"Feels suffocating here," she'd told him. "At least down there, there's room to spread."

In the seven years that'd come and gone since, her green eyes had learned to glow a further emerald, her brown skin stayed smooth but drooped more at the edges of her lips, and the wide hoop earrings that'd always bracketed her face went missing. She'd done something to her hair too, he didn't know exactly what.

"L.A.'s done you good, Merch," he swigged from the bottle.

"It's easier on the complexion down there, that's for sure. Not constantly battling the elements," she said. "But nowadays, I only drink 12-dollar cocktails on a stranger's dime, and only party poolside in the hills."

"You'd fit in well here again now," he smiled.

"Maybe if I'd shown up last week I could've said the Bay's done you good." Her smooth fingertips traced the scabbed-over cuts that still dotted his face since his drunken fall down the BART stairs. "Brawlin' again?"

"Someone's gotta stand up to the bad guys," Pug said. "You back in town for a bit then?"

"Depends," she said, and spoke those words Pug had more than an inkling were coming.

“I need your help, Milo,” she exhaled.

He sniffed his feelings that swirled within him into a series of calm nods, finished his beer, and sipped from Tor’s commandeered PBR.

“Alright,” he said. “As they say, step into my office.”

Pug led with a forced smile past the joyfully soppy piano karaoke congregation, now nodding along to an added beat from a new drum kit. He looked over his shoulder and saw Tor at the bar’s other end, keeping occupied as he waited for the beer that’d never come by reading postcards and dreaming up plots, no doubt. Pug offered a hand to Mercia, and the old couple slid into a booth. Pug christened it by flicking at a stapled-up business card, its pre-bent corner hinting at its role in this sort of ritual over the years.

“How’d you know I was here anyway?” Pug asked.

“It’s past ten on a weekend, so,” Mercia trailed with a smirk. “And I was tipped off by an old friend.”

Pug peered through the bar to find Tommy, but he’d since made himself scarce. At the piano, Dibble told a woman in blue to get closer to the mic, and she resumed her smoky rendition of “Dream a Little Dream.” Pug mindlessly tapped his foot along to the beat.

“So, what can Pug do for you?” he said.

“It’s Sam,” Mercia said, and steeled herself with a deep inhale. “He’s missing.”

Sam was Mercia’s younger brother, her junior by a few years. She told Pug that he still kept his head shaved, a hoodie pulled over it as soon as he stepped outside, same as when Pug first met him, at some dinner with Mercia’s family during their time together. They’d bonded quickly over their hatreds, though they weren’t necessarily mutual. But that all still wasn’t enough to justify friendly communication after Mercia broke it off.

“Sam got himself an apartment last year near Jack London. He was paying for it with this cafe gig,” she told him. “But after not hearing from him for a few weeks, my parents went to check in, and he was gone. Like he’d never lived there. Landlord didn’t get a forwarding address. My parents think he’s back on drugs.”

“What do you think?”

“Fuck if I know,” Mercia said. “I’ve been gone, and kid’s

always been a mystery to me anyway. But he's my brother, and he's missing, and I heard you handle these sorts of thing now, like it's your gig or something."

"Sort of," Pug said. "Usually it's mostly finding lost cats, missing car keys, basic plumbing work," he shook his head, "no one knows how to fix anything anymore."

"Have a normal hourly rate or something?"

"Fuck off, Merch," Pug said. "As if."

He finished the PBR and let out a burp while staring at his former love, the landmine.

"Let's go find this brother of yours then."



BY JESSICA WASSIL.

Chapter Six

THE CAMARO'S HOOD reflected the blazing afternoon sun, as it cruised past the looming Odd Fellows Hall, scaffolded in the midst of a big cocktail-bar makeover. It crept under the highway overpass and into the gloom where a new tent encampment had sprouted, then back from the shadows into the clear blue. They hung a left at Mandela Parkway, then parked a few blocks down. Pug ran out and made it to the grassy median before Tommy halted him with a yell.

"Yo, Pug," Tommy squinted. "We have a plan?"

"Ask some questions?" Pug shrugged. "And use the information we get to find Sam. It's pretty basic shit."

They waited for a rusted truck loaded with pipes of various sorts to finally sputter past, and then crossed the street to a store in disarray from its own renovation. Its front was covered in planks of plywood nailed vertically. From behind them came the muffled racket of a table saw whirring through air and screaming through wood.

An address was spray-painted in ragged black across the plywood, and Pug checked it against the one Mercia had given. He back-pocketed the paper, pried open a plank, and pulled aside the thick plastic tarp that gave the inside a filmy

haze. He presented the entrance to Tommy in an “after you” motion.

“No, no,” Tommy said. “Please, after you.”

Pug shifted past the plastic and entered an open white space carpeted by detritus. Plastic scraps, orphaned metal, packing peanuts, wood shavings topping it all like confetti after the ball. Holes for light fixtures had been carved into the ceiling, and a waist-high divider bisected the place, pre-figuring some bureaucratic-like maze. But that was all that’d been done, aside from the white tile backsplash carefully set into a side wall. It was being examined by a tall, skinny man in horn-rimmed glasses. He traced the grout with a finger and yelled toward the back.

“Grout needs smoothing!” he said. “Like a fine silk, I said—”

Whomever he was dictating to revved their saw up again, which screamed an interruption. The boss man turned around to see Pug and Tommy standing there awkwardly, then turned back as if these intruders were the most natural thing in the world.

“Just in time, boys,” he called through a bushy, cultivated mustache that covered his lips. “Bring your grout smoother, or whatever it is you use to...”

“We’re not who you’re thinking we are, here to do whatever it is you think needs doing,” Pug said. “You the owner?”

He was. A white man named Joseph Klint. He’d made his scratch in Seattle tech, but don’t ask for any further particulars, I can’t keep that shit straight. He moved down here the year before with dreams of owning and operating his very own cafe. After weeks searching for the right spot, Klint approached this joint’s ownership with too-good-to-be-true dough and got to gutting.

“Used to do a bomb chicken sandwich here,” Tommy said.

“We’ll have our own take on it,” Klint countered. “I think you’ll like it.”

“Twice as expensive, no doubt,” Tommy muttered, “to pay for all this bullshit.”

Klint turned around for confrontation, but before he mustered one, Pug stepped in.

“An old friend used to work here before it was whatever this is gonna be,” Pug said. “And we’re looking for him.”

“Wouldn’t know about that,” Klint said, and turned back around to examine the wall tile once more. “We let previous employment go, and we’ll begin hiring new staff in a month. If your pal’s interested, have him email his C.V.”

“Doubt you’d like him,” Tommy said. “Too rough around the edges.”

“Have any old files lying around, perchance?” Pug asked. “Would help, maybe. He’s in a bit of trouble, so anything might.”

Klint huffed and walked them toward the noise of the whirring saw and the cold glare from the worker manning it. He swung open a door to a barren office with a single ergonomic chair bashfully facing the corner. Klint pulled open the sliding door of a closet. Inside was a three-drawer metal file cabinet.

“Welcome to give ‘em a look,” Klint said. “As long as you take ‘em out when you’re done.”

Tommy and Pug dumped the files on the linoleum. Twenty minutes later, they discovered Sam’s W-9 stuck to the bottom of a folder with “health care” scribbled on front. The W-9 had been signed with the Jack London address, but a small Post-It addendized a new one. Pug ripped it off and they walked through the scattered loose papers that littered the ground out to the door.

“How about those files?” Klint asked as they breezed past and through the plastic sheet entrance.

Tommy muttered a few “motherfuckers” under his breath.

“We’ll send over our assistant to collect ‘em,” Pug said.

They hopped back in the Camaro and drove to Seventh, where they were stopped by a red light. The chirps from the walk signal gave way to chimes from the departing BART, paused at the West Oakland station picking up one last batch of folks before crossing the bay.

Tommy smiled and revved his engine, picking a drag race with the train elevated on the same parallel straight-away next to them. When the light flicked green, he peeled down Seventh, past Esther’s Orbit Room and the street’s other jazz ghosts, past the leviathan post office distribution center that helped drain the stretch’s soul. In the rearview, the BART was still stuck at the starting line, waiting for passengers to give up or push their way in.

“Wouldn’t call that exactly fair,” Pug said, “but you sure showed ‘em, anyway.”

The address they’d found was for a run-down three-story Victorian on a forgotten street as far west as Oakland can go. The massive white harbor cranes loomed in the background like pallbearers waiting for their cue. The house’s windows were boarded up, the entrance staircase long gone, grass tall enough to hide the basement windows. The rusted-over posts from the long-missing fence thwarted an attempt by the setting sun to further its impact through reflection.

They knocked on the door. No answer, but shuffling inside. They returned to the car.

“Should at least get flashlights or a fucking machete before we head back in,” Tommy said.

“That’d spoil the fun.”

They flipped through the radio as they waited for the sun’s last gasp. The closeout of Marketplace gave way to reggae on KPFA, and the night’s new darkness revealed a flickering candle behind the top story’s boarded windows.

Pug got out first. He tiptoed through the bricks and broken glass that decorated the lawn and brushed aside the wiry refuse that had collected in front of the basement window.

“You, uh, want to go first this time?” Pug asked.

“Fuck off,” was the reply.

From a squat, Pug wiggled his sinewy fingers under the window’s edge and pried it open. He crammed a shoulder in first, which went smoothly enough until an errant, crooked nail snagged his denim jacket. He tried to unhook himself with a shimmy, but heard a further tear, so he peeled the jacket off and let it hang.

Pug pushed inward so his chest was in the basement’s dank, dark space, then he squeezed the rest of his torso in. He blindly stretched out an arm and grabbed a pipe that hugged the basement ceiling. He pulled on it once to test its strength and, satisfied, lowered himself down. But when he got one leg through the opening so that his body was split between interior and exterior, the pipe gave way, and bits of ceiling and dust rained down on Pug as he fell the six foot drop onto the cardboard covering the cement floor. The window snapped shut behind him.

“You okay?” Tommy asked through the closed window.

Pug stood with a wince to examine his injuries, but was stopped short by the cool blade pressed against his throat, and the warm breath against the back of his neck.



BY YUNG COCONUT.

Chapter Seven

“PUG, YOU OKAY?”

Tommy’s muffled voice came from some distant location outside. Pug didn’t really know the answer, so he remained silent and awaited clarity.

“Who the hell’r you then?” spit a wheezy, asthmatic voice right into Pug’s ear. “I’ll cut your ass if you lie to me, my man,” the voice nearly whispered.

“I’d explain,” Pug croaked. “But I’m feeling preoccupied with this knife to my throat.”

Pug passed the next seconds, silent except for the heart-beat throb in his ears, by puzzling out how he’d tourniquet his slashed throat with only his bare hands for a compress. By the time he’d figured out that he’d actually be quite fucked in that instance, the knife lifted ever so gently from the seam that it’d dug. Pug took this as prospect for peace.

“Looking for a friend, might be staying here,” he said. “Name’s Sam, Sam Jones.”

“Don’t know anyone by that name,” the voice said. “What’s he look like?”

“Black dude, bald, wears a hoody,” Pug said. “Face like he’s either trying to solve a puzzle or was just hit by a passing

fart, always squinting and such.”

The blade fell.

“Shit,” the voice said. “Think I’ve seen that dude.”

Pug turned around, and standing there was a long-haired, skinny white guy with a blonde mustache and a grin that was a few teeth light. His name was Dave, and this was his bedroom.

Tucked into the far corner on a carpet of cardboard was a king-size mattress flush against the wall. An assortment of paperback books, water-damaged and torn at the corners, were scattered about.

“I like the coolness of the basement,” he explained even though Pug didn’t ask. “Good for snoozing.”

A one-two knock shook the single pane of basement window. Tommy’s confused face peered in.

“Ah, just go around, mate?” Dave shouted. “Could’ve knocked, you know,” he muttered to Pug.

“Next time,” Pug said, and analyzed the bump already growing at the end of his left elbow, looking for a break. He figured that he’d gotten lucky during the fall, but it still stung like hell.

They carefully navigated the staircase, just loose planks balancing on the rails, and met Tommy upstairs in the back hall of the darkened main floor. Black shapes lined their path and torn, faint-gray carpet muffled their steps. Dave lifted and forcibly pulled the back door off its stuck frame, letting the amber street light from a block over stream in, highlighting a disturbed layer of dust that swirled and rained a fine mist onto Pug.

“Oh yeah,” said Dave. “Heads up.”

They got the story in the kitchen around the center island’s flickering candles, shadows from the rusted chandelier dancing in chaotic assembly on the cracked ceiling above. Dave was not in the house alone. A few others lived at the joint.

When notified about this, the house suddenly seemed to breath around Tommy and Pug. Shut doors. Flung open windows. Pacing footfalls. The creaks of hobbies, ways to pass the time. Dave pulled back the curtain of a kitchen window and the newcomers saw the moonlit field of waist-high barrels in the yard, there to collect drinkable and flushable

water. They'd also run a clandestine extension cord a few houses down for emergencies.

"Like blending a kick-ass margarita," croaked Latch, a squat woman who'd scurried in with a pile of loose ice cupped within the stained, front bottom of her t-shirt. She funneled the ice into the blender, followed by a couple of limes, sugar, and the rest of a Jose Cuervo bottle, and began churning. She poured the concoction into four equal glasses, and they all toasted a long and happy life, a quick and easy death.

"Whew, boy now," Latch said. "Sometimes the only cure there is for a long-ass day."

She'd spent her early hours staggering to Grand and Wood to collect change from the morning commuters, combed lawns and gutters for bottles and cans, hiked the mile to the Alliance Recycling Center to trade them in, and back to her spot at Grand and Wood for the afternoon commuters before hiking back to where she called home, however temporary it may be. Dave, Latch, and the rest of them were told they'd be able stay "for awhile" without any problems from the city's squatter patrol.

"Our understanding is, whoever owns this doesn't care much about it," Latch explained. "Now, at least. They'll pluck it when it's ripe for development. But we did them a favor, now they're doing us one."

"What favor was that?" Tommy asked.

Latch glanced at Dave and was met with an upturned eyebrow, then a worried stare at the ceiling's flickering dancers.

"Small errands," Latch said. "Making sure cars were moved during street sweeping, taking shit to the post office, that kind of thing."

Reggie, a rail-thin Black man, strut into the kitchen with an easy smirk on his face. Latch gave him a sip of margarita and he introduced himself. Reggie was wearing an Oakland Raiders Super Bowl XXXVII championship tee.

"Nice find," Pug said, nodding at the shirt.

"Found this in Goodwill's dollar bin, you believe that?" Reggie said, pulling at the heavy cotton. "Hella priceless, far as I'm concerned."

Dave relayed who the newcomers were looking for, and

Pug flicked on his phone to scroll to a photo.

“Yeah, I’ve seen him,” Reggie said. “Been staying up top for awhile now.”

Reggie led them up the winding staircase, where they heard scuffles and coughs behind the top floor’s four doors. A shadow scurried past a cracked door, a snore was rattling from inside another. Reggie pointed ahead, and Pug knocked one-two on the door. No answer.

“Haven’t seen him for a minute,” Reggie said.

Pug twisted the knob and cracked the door, uttering a meek “Hello?” to no response.

He poked his head in and was hit by a fresh gust of wind blowing in through the gaping hole where a window should’ve been.

Beyond the threshold, in the distance on the Bay’s shiny new bridge, the flashing yellows from the highway workers gave way to the structure’s first tail of exiting red lights and soon thereafter the blinding whites from those coming back east. The bridge was open for business.

When Pug’s eyes adjusted, they revealed the silhouette of a man in a chair, facing out into the cold, open air, gazing at the same bridges. The man’s head was rocking to the beat of some unheard music.

“Shit, sorry,” Pug said with embarrassment, and quickly pulled shut the door.

He turned to Tommy who was stone-faced, offering nothing in comfort. He waited a moment for a response, and when none came, he opened the door again.

“Hello?”

The nodding of the man’s head continued, but the rest of his body remained still. He crept toward the chair, saw the person’s hands gripping its carved handles. The floorboards of the old house creaked with each step.

“Sam?” Pug asked.

The ocean swell of the distant, whirring traffic was overtaken by a sound much closer.

A slightly wet sloshing noise.

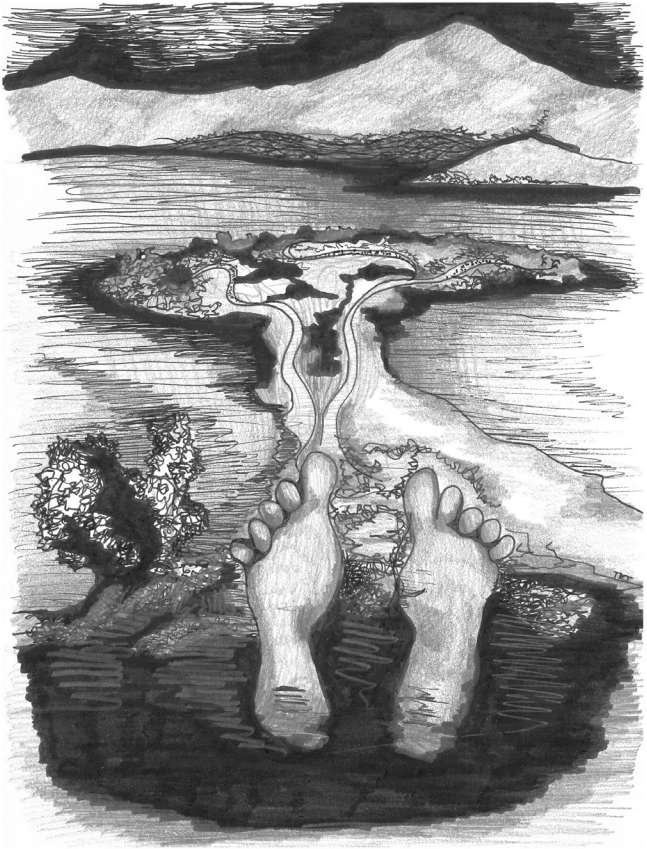
A gnawing, almost.

Pug tugged the figure’s arm and when he did the rat that had been gnawing on the face now ground meat scurried down the dead man’s body and bolted out the window.

It climbed onto a telephone wire and shuffled west, out to the shadow of that old steel bridge, now forgotten in the dark next to the bright lights of its shiny, new neighbor.

Part II

Rezoning



BY TRAVIS TARR.

Chapter Eight

THE SUN ROSE the next day, and its rays peered through the creased and dirty blinds and found Pug sitting up, long awake, bare back against the cold of the apartment's wall.

He'd just called Mercia after the cops had taken away the body, after they'd taken away Sam.

It was him, no doubt, despite lack of face left ungnawed to give the pure positive ID. But it was Sam's skin tone, his tightly trimmed hair, his hoodie draped over the squared shoulders of his blocky build. Forensics would trade out the "John Doe" when the tests came back, but everyone already knew.

Pug had told Mercia that they'd found empty vials on the ground, a needle in his arm. "Overdose" was to be that final narrative beat before credits closed on the life of Samuel Thomas Jones.

"I don't want to see him," Mercia said over the phone.

The shock of devastation was battling her rising anger, already wrestling with the guilt that came with knowing she'd foreseen this end years ago.

"Promise me this is your one taste," the older sister had pled with the younger brother in their family's garage, way

back when. “And now you’ve tried it, and that’s the last of it.”

And it had been, for awhile.

After she’d moved to L.A., it was like she made her escape with the only working rudder in the family, leaving Sam to drift off into that lonely sea. The rest of the story was predictable: the dimming of job prospects came with frustrating boredom that led to another taste. Hours and days gone by as recruiters called for interviews then gave up, and what the hell, nothing going on that night anyway, maybe time for one last taste, and a last one after that.

Mercia soon started getting frantic long-distance calls from her mom, and tried to do the best she could as an ethereal role model only present in calls and texts and emails. But she wasn’t anyone’s mama, she had her own shit to deal with, too, you know.

A few nights in jail for trying and failing miserably to rob a liquor store didn’t help shit for Sam, why would it, but the fog cleared up some when he got that cafe gig through a friend. Seemed to steer him back toward land, at least to calmer seas.

When he found that place in Jack London, everyone around him calmed a bit too. They breathed a little easier. They’d all made it through, was the thought. That wild ride was finally rolling to a stop, they sighed.

“Find out who hooked him again,” Mercia rasped from whatever dark place she was in. “Milo, find who killed my baby brother.” Her sobbing gasp was snipped off by the ended call.

Pug filled out the coroner’s paperwork so they were free to wheel Sam’s body off to whomever would put him in the ground, Frank rubber-stamping the kin-only signatory lines along the way to give Mercia and her family some cushion from the town’s cold bureaucracy.

“Tests came back,” Frank said, the block heels of his boots clicking against the OPD tile as they walked. “Heroin cut with fentanyl. They make it on the cheap with shit they get over the counter and use it to cut the heroin so their supply lasts longer. It does the trick, feels like the real shit, but now and then someone forgets to carry a one, and poof.”

“This a new thing going around?” Pug asked, his flat sneakers making a faint squeak in the hall.

“Not the first I’ve heard,” Frank responded. “But mostly out east. Hope this isn’t the start of something.”

Frank lifted the manila folder and tapped Pug on the shoulder like a king to his knight, steel-eyed under his tipped-forward brow. "This isn't on you," he said. "Ain't on anyone but him."

A beat of silence, and Frank's boots clicked off down the hallway to turn in the final paperwork.

Pug walked out of OPD and then the few blocks to the public defender's office.

He knocked on the fogged glass and interpreted the silence as an invitation. He strolled through the field of empty desks and barren bulletin boards, following the puffs of April's exhausted sighs to her workstation. When he cornered around the cubicle divider, her shoulder was cradling her phone. She lifted a finger to hush the new company.

"Stop dicking around, Kyle," she side-spoke into the receiver. "You're not getting more than a few months, you know that."

Pug heard a stuttering tin from the phone speaker near her ear.

"And that shit's still worth the price of the dance for the D.A.'s office?"

A high-pitched yammering whined through the line.

"Well, dipshit, fuck right the fuck off then, if that's where we're headed."

She slammed the phone down.

"Lawyers are a weird batch, man," Pug said.

"That Kyle was Kyle Labriola," April said, her eyes now closed, her long fingers unkinning the tightness in her temples. "Assistant D.A., the one who got that Royce Grace case you did that work on. Thinks he's King Shit of Fuck Mountain."

"Sounds like an asshole."

"Less useful," April said. "Boss is looking to get his baby feet wet with trial action on this non-case, so they're not taking plea deals. Meaning they're going for court time."

"That other guy, the one Royce knocked around," Pug said. "Not like he was missing teeth or nothing."

"A few hundred-plus hospital bills would usually be enough to clear this from the slate, but babies need practice before they get to really start fucking people over," she said. "Anyway, wouldn't matter. I was mostly just riling his ass up. Royce isn't going for pleas. Too much dignity and righteousness on his end. Still doesn't think he did anything wrong. Doesn't even want to

spend money on bail, so he's just chilling right where they left him."

"He's still in jail?"

"He doesn't think he did anything wrong, is his point," April smirked. "He doesn't feel it's right that anything comes out of his pocket, not even bail money."

"A man's got to stand for something."

"Or just sit and rot away, I guess," she said. "All seems like nonsense to me."

They paused long enough to shift the conversation's tone. She'd heard about Sam, and offered her condolences. He relayed the info about the heroin cut with fentanyl. She bit a pen's end, said it sounded familiar, and took to her laptop, silencing Pug with another lifted finger. A minute later, she groaned.

"Thought so," she said. "Know the Albany Bulb?"

"Sure, up near the track, landfill or something," Pug said.

"Big homeless population," she said. "Kinda off and on, depending on when Albany's homeowners decide they want it as a dog park. Anyway, over the past year, there's been a few OD's there from that heroin/fentanyl mix."

"Shit."

"That's not all. Every now and then, cops take IDs of folks living there. Not sure there's any legal explanation, but it's a database to know who's where. And check this out."

She tapped her long, red fingernail on the laptop screen.

Sam's name was on the roll.



BY RYAN THE TRUCK.

Chapter Nine

THE WIND HOWLED IN from the bay. It hit the thin beach at the westernmost edge of northern Berkeley and peeled up twisted rinds of sand that rubbed Pug's face raw. He winced and wiped his eyes with frozen, aching fingers while his other hand steadied his bike on its aim north.

To his right, the spattering of cars avoiding the jam on the 580. To his left, ocean.

He crossed the border into Albany and pushed past the bridge with that awkward sculpture of ravenous protestors, then past the empty soccer fields. He grimaced up the ascending entrance of Golden Gate Fields racetrack, where his dad used to take him for Dollar Sundays. Pug coasted down the hill, between an empty parking lot and another beach, where scattered dogs barked at the foam of the bubbling surf. He hopped off his bike and walked the narrow neck of land into the Albany Bulb proper.

Once, on a Sunday long past, his dad had told him the history of this odd contortion that jutted into the bay like some giant lure. It was made up entirely of landfill, first earth and debris that'd been carved for the racetrack, then refuse from the so-called progress created by construction companies, and then,

some say, BART trying to bury the past they'd shoved out of the way to make room for their lines. The Bulb grew like a mold until the 80s, when the misguided dreams to keep filling in the bay came to an end. But this new real estate was here, and nature persisted as it does, growing like anywhere else.

Soon came plants and the tiniest of animals, and then the people with nowhere else to go. They congregated, built, created, until one disturbance or another brought in the cops to bust up the camp. They'd be sent off into the night to anywhere but here, wait the requisite days for the heat to die down, and find their way back to this community to congregate, build, create some more. When one of them scared some anxious dog-walker again, the cops would return to roust the camp, and the cycle would begin anew.

Pug pushed his bike over a rail of rebar half-buried in the dirt, and turned down a path wide enough for a car. A teepee made of canvas and PVC pipe was pitched under a tree, and through its opening lay brown and chalky feet. Pug heard loud snoring coming from inside and decided to move on for now. On his left, a four-tiered amphitheater had been dug out of the ground. Scattered clothes had been left on the steps to dry. At the end of the path straight ahead stood an enormous scrap-metal sculpture of a monstrous woman, her arms outstretched in a manner of beckoning so that as he walked to her, it seemed as if she was running to greet him.

Sitting on a lawn chair in front of it was a white man with a weathered face and reddened eyes. He stared at the statue, surveying it, a saluting hand at his brow to block the sun. Pug interrupted with a photo of Sam on his phone, but the man waved him off and went back to his study. Pug tried two other people leaping playfully in the shallow surf, hopping from one chunk of debris to the next to examine what lived in these man-made tide pools, to uncover whatever metals they could salvage. One time they'd found a car engine, another time an old bomb made for World War II. They hadn't seen anyone that looked like Sam either.

He walked back through the wide main thoroughfare and paused when he heard a rustling over the ridge. Pug set down his bike and peeked over, and saw a middle-aged Black woman in a purple sweatshirt tending a small garden.

Her name was Lucy.

“Sure, I know Sam,” Lucy said, wiping sweat from her forehead. Pug spoke of Sam in the past tense, and Lucy gritted her teeth through a smile, shook her head, and daintily offered her hand like a debutante. “I’ll show you where he stayed.”

Lucy hefted herself over the hill and took the other handle of Pug’s bike to help guide it along. They strolled to the Bulb’s other end, and along the way Pug got enough pieces of Lucy’s story to patch a brief history together, but I’ll fill in the rest myself.

The crash in ‘08 claimed her secretarial job at a local realty office, and with it took the steady payments she was making on the two-story in some new subdivision out in Castro Valley. It soon became the bank’s problem. She’d moved to the city for a shitty job and cheap rent in a SRO on 16th street, and stayed there a year—until it was sold and illegally turned into condos while everyone looked some other way. A week on the street with no way to actually sleep meant two warnings at work, then no more job entirely.

She bused back across the Bay Bridge, it had a warmer atmosphere anyway. A few months back, she got a part-time gig at a greasy spoon, but the rental market had long since passed her by, so she stayed without a fortified roof over her head. Someone told her about the Bulb, so she gave it a whirl. It wasn’t perfect, but she didn’t hate it all that much, all things being equal. Worst part was lugging water all the way from the other side of the highway, and then some jerk in camp swiping chugs when she wasn’t looking.

“Here we are,” she said, offering up a small clearing at the Bulb’s western edge, facing the shiny city of San Francisco. There was a labyrinth made of concrete chunks and surrounding by tents. Lucy pointed to a dark blue one. Pug crawled inside and felt around for lighters, pipes, syringes, but found none. He turned to sit up and let his feet hang out of the tent. Lucy pulled up a white plastic chair outside.

“Sorry for your loss,” she said. “Didn’t meet him more than a few times. Can’t say much more, I’m afraid.” A smile appeared on her lips at the approaching patter of a dog’s paws on the concrete path. “This might cheer you some.”

They turned to look, and bounding up the path was a stout

black pit bull with a white slash across his face and a drooping belly that swayed side to side with each step. The dog saw Lucy, and as he did, his mouth seemed to pull back in a grin as he launched full sprint. The pit licked Lucy in the face, then did the same to Pug.

“Pooch loves Lucy!” boomed a deep voice behind them.

“And Lucy loves Pooch!” she shouted back.

Pug followed the voice, and through the thick camouflage of trees he made out a motley collection of wooden planks, iron fencing, loose doors, shipping crates, and black canvas tarps that, in some confusing Escherian way, formed a homemade mansion. A grill was set dead center on the roof next to a telescope that aimed at the bridges and the city beyond.

“Pooch loves Lucy more!”

The voice came from a heavy white man with a long, gray beard. He leaned on the top railing of his house, and wore a tie-dye shirt along with a hat topped with a propeller beanie. This was Greg. Lucy waved him down, and when he arrived, he put an arm around Lucy’s neck and kissed her on the cheek. They told him about Sam.

The foursome sat on the graffiti-decorated concrete slabs that walled off the water, and they shared a joint and watched the sun fall behind the glassy cityscape. Silences were filled with the few stories they knew about Sam, and one of them spurred Greg’s memory to a time about a week ago when someone had been here at the camp looking for him.

“Tall guy, rail-thin, slicked-back hair, sunglasses, wearing a suit,” Greg said. “Business type, you know. Had a weird limp too, like something was off with his hip. Asking around for Sam, just like you, a photo on his phone, just like you. Thought he was a social worker at first, but didn’t have the right demeanor for that kind of work.”

Greg scratched behind Pooch’s ear, who let out a yawn and rolled over for a belly scratch.

“Weird thing is, I’d seen him before,” Greg said. “Awhile back, I’d panhandle downtown Oakland, and I swear I’d see that guy coming and going from that hotel downtown, you know, the Marriott?”

“Sure, I know it,” Pug said.

“He’d always be walking out with a new young gal, push her

off in a cab, and head back inside,” Greg said. “Though I don’t see how any of this information’ll help you.”

But Pug had stopped listening.

He’d already flicked on his phone to text the perfect person who’d know all about the comings and goings at the downtown Marriott.



BY MARGO SNYDER.

Chapter Ten

PUG KNEW CHARLOTTE from a Laney College night class. They'd both been putting finishing touches on the prereqs for what were to be shiny careers in the burgeoning fields of coding and finance, respectively, before they'd thought through the reality and meaning of life down those two largely parallel paths.

Back then, she'd had her hair cropped short and dyed black, and with her waifish frame and snapped-wide eyes, she looked like a punk from 80s New York scene. She told him she liked his Neurosis t-shirt, so they got pizza after class one night, then connected on enough social media to be considered "friends" in that sense of the word at least.

Charlotte soon realized that finance was a path only to self-harm, so she reset for a career in family counseling. A week into the new classes, her waitress gig dried up, then her contacts with job prospects went quiet too. Two months late for rent, she took her bud up on an offer to dance at an amateur night at a North Beach club, out there in the city. She found she had the stomach for that strobe-lit atmosphere moreso than the one that necessitated dragging herself up at dawn weekend mornings to deal with the rude and entitled sending back their brunch scrambles because the onions were cut too thin or some such shit. When

a club patron offered her two months waitress pay to spend a weekend on an island with him, Charlotte found she had the stomach for that too.

She built a website, added a shade of blonde-pink to her hair, marketed herself as a specialist in “the girlfriend experience,” and bought an ad on Back Page dot com announcing a special get-to-know-you \$300 hourly rate with “Cassandra.” After a month, she found that adding a digit brought a richer clientele. She blocked out her availability on her schedule whenever she had an exam the next morning.

When Pug texted, she was in the midst of a meditation session to rest and reset her attention muscles. These parts, not the sexual ones, were those that needed the most regular maintenance. Those were the ones truly exhausted and worn down by whoever was easily dropping a grand an hour.

She was going to ignore Pug’s text until the next day, but he made an “URGENT” secondary plea, so off went the Enya and into the car she hopped.

She’d helped him with some odd gigs before, mostly background info on which top techies had gripes with who and why. If they hadn’t seen her personally, they for sure saw someone else she knew. Word gets around. But she didn’t spill for a few twenties like Pug’s other informants—she did it for free. He was one of the few who didn’t disappear when she changed careers. That meant a lot. And he was always reliable to hang around within screaming distance whenever she met a new, unverified client. That meant even more.

They met up at Awaken Cafe downtown, and after pleasantries, Pug told her about the man in a suit with a bum-hip limp. He described what he knew about the man, told her he did “plenty of business,” air quotes heavy enough to topple their table, at the downtown Marriott.

“Fucking yeah, man,” she said with a light giddiness to her voice. “Like ninety percent sure I know him, anyway. Hair greased back like a porcupine?”

Pug left out that detail on purpose for the confirmation. He grinned over the top of his steaming mug.

“Name’s Hamilton,” she said. “Forget the last, but I can look it up. We met up once, but didn’t have the right... chemistry, I guess you’d say.” A pause. “Dude’s a stone cold weirdo.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“I mean,” she hesitated, and Pug urged her along with details of Sam, found in that West Oakland Victorian, O.D.’d into his last slumber, face gnawed off by a rat. “Into some weird shit.”

“Bondage?”

“Oh, dear Pug, I wouldn’t call that ‘weird.’ People just don’t talk about it in polite company,” Charlotte winked. “Nah, like...”

She took a sip and her nostrils flared as she searched for the words.

“Like he had this thing for renting a room on the top floor, and angling our, um, activities in such a way that we’d face a mirror—again, not so weird—but also so his side was pressed against the window. Said he liked looking down at the people below. But like I said, he had that mirror set up too, so.”

Charlotte shook as if some invisible hand had tickled her back.

“When I looked back once, he had this weird, hateful look in his eyes while he was staring down. It’s tough to describe or even clarify, it just creeped me out. Something was off behind them. So, that was first and last chance saloon.”

“Does he have a rep with other girls?”

“Tough to say,” Charlotte said. “If a girl asks me about him, I ward them off as best I can. Like, ‘he wasn’t for me’ kinda thing. Usually that’s enough. Beyond that, we don’t follow up. After I say my piece, they’re on their own.”

“Well, Charlotte, this is all important and gross information,” Pug said.

She laughed in a sort of surprised cackle.

“You asked for it, man.”

“I know, I know,” he said.

“But have anything else that might help?”

“Hold on,” she whipped out her phone. Pug looked at his, saw three unread messages from Mercia, and decided to save that mess for later. He saw another one from Harriet about still needing a place to crash, and was about to respond when a ruckus outside pulled his attention away.

Across Broadway, three cops had surrounded a gaunt Black man with speckled hair. He sat on the curb, his legs dangled out into traffic. Behind him, a shopping cart had been tipped over, and a flood of smashed cans had scattered on the sidewalk and

over the curb like a waterfall frozen still.

The cops stood with hands on their belts near holstered guns. One of them examined the broken glass of the Chase bank nearby. The detained man smirked at the business as usual and mumbled a flat plea for help to passersby, none in particular.

“Got it,” Charlotte said. “Friend says he goes to happy hour at The Trappist.”

Pug went there later that day, had three sours in the front bar, or maybe it was the back, he could never figure out which, then stumbled home without incident. Second day’s happy hour, same result. On the third, a man matching Greg’s description sat at the rounded hinge of the L-shaped bar.

He waited for the man to use the bathroom, and Pug watched him walk with an odd quirk, as if there was a missing beat in every step, as if film frames had been lost in a fire and the reel was patched by an amateur. It was a limp you didn’t notice, until you did, and then you couldn’t see anything else.

Pug shifted to the empty stool next to the man in question and waited for his return. After a conversation about the feckless management of the A’s, Pug introduced himself in proper fashion. He called the bartender over and bought his new pal Hamilton a drink.



BY DARRYL JONES.

Chapter Eleven

THE BARTENDER had a long ponytail and wore a metal pendant around her neck. It was a thin, vertical strip that swayed freely like a pendulum as she crossed behind the bar, then caught and stuck on her damp skin. She gritted a smile, set two more pilsners in front of the fast new friends, and returned to the chaos of the happy hour rush.

“That Moneyball bullshit tricked everyone into thinking there was some hidden nobility in winning on the cheap,” Hamilton said, sipping the foam off the top of his beer, his face a dark shadow from the lurking pre-beard underneath, beginning its forever struggle to reclaim territory lost in the morning shave. “That’s sucker logic. Management keeps their millions while fans argue busts and bargains over their twelve-dollar piss beers.”

He took a sip.

“It’s so fucking brilliant,” Hamilton said, shaking his head.

“The A’s play in a small market, though!” Pug said, a rising pitch to his voice. “What they don’t have in resources, they make up with in smarts.”

“That’s smoke screen,” Hamilton said. “Until owners lose money on a season, they’re not doing all they can to build a championship.”

Pug shook his head and smiled with the wince of an incredulous instructor asked by some rabble-rousing punk to prove the world isn't flat. An exhaled, "Shit..." was all he could muster.

They started talking work, and Pug explained his gig, or tried to. After a few bumbling attempts, the two settled on Pug's job description as being a largely undefined method of piece-meal freelancing.

"You know where that term freelancing comes from?" Hamilton said, sitting back on his stool far enough that Pug instinctively threw out an arm to catch him, but he righted before it was needed. "The olden days of swords and horses, of kings and kingdoms. When someone needed a few extra pals for a battle, they threw gold coins at mercenaries who knew how to fight. Now, there's more complex mechanisms to fight with, and they do much greater damage. Pens and what-have-yous, instead of swords and maces."

He hoisted his glass for a toast to no one in particular.

"So, if you're not using lances, what's your weapon?"

"Wit and charm, I guess," said Pug. "And deep reserves of cold, dumb stupidity, of not knowing when to stop."

"Those are certainly some of the more potent tools when used properly," Hamilton said.

He trailed off as he noticed three men hovering around a high-top. They wore suits of differently shaded gray, and one pointed to a laminated map that was held in place by the weight of their glasses, the bubbling amber liquid within was given fresh, glowing life by the angle of the setting sun.

"Excuse me," Hamilton said, and with a casual flick of his wrist elegantly placed a coaster atop his glass. He took an awkward two-step off his stool and quickly righted his limp in such a forceful way that Pug saw the remnants of sharp pain shoot across his face. Hamilton drew a calming breath through his nose and approached the trio with a sober smile, still handshake, and upright pose.

The sun, with a trajectory that made Oakland feel like an ant hill under a magnifying lens, snuck into the bar through the last inch between mesh curtain and window bottom. It left a warm spot on the back of Pug's bare tricep, where a skull tattoo was ingrained, a ghost from his teenage days that lost sharpness with each passing year.

He watched Hamilton and saw an added crinkle in his eye form as he spoke to the men. Pug sipped from his beer and went over their last hour of conversation together, nearly entirely focused on the A's recent run and what it portended for the approaching playoffs.

During the chat, Pug had collected some basics: Hamilton worked in real estate, but unclear in what capacity. He was a Bay native, but hadn't given up exactly from where. He lived in a high-rise overlooking Lake Merritt, and his view was spectacular.

The trio of men had, by now, encircled Hamilton in a dance of competing suitors. Hamilton spoke, and they responded with laughter loud enough to spread wincing and eye-rolls of annoyance around the bar. Hamilton concluded with handshakes and back pats all around and returned to the stool next to Pug.

"Sorry you had to see that," Hamilton said. "It's an embarrassing display, but those guys move and shake the land around here, the creators of the tremors, and as such, I must offer sacrifice," and he extended his arms and bowed his head to present himself.

"What do you do, anyhow?"

"What I'll say is, I earn my money from these guys," Hamilton handed over a gold business card that'd been waiting in the palm of his hand. It was for a company called Gentry Realtors, located out in Fruitvale. The logo was a statuesque man in sharp art deco style, holding a glowing orb above his shoulder as if he was about to throw a fastball.

Pug tapped on the logo.

"What's this guy up to?"

"Building the future, is what I was told," Hamilton said. "We locate areas that are in disrepair or neglected, get them back into fighting shape, and offer them to the community at prices they can afford. Our unofficial motto is that gentrification shouldn't be a bad word."

"That's a tough sell here, nowadays."

"No shit," Hamilton said. "But really, we're just the latest iteration of what's been happening out here since the beginning. Stake your claim, use your toil and sweat to develop, make it better."

"Then move onto the next once the gold's run dry?"

Hamilton smiled, but behind his eyes Pug saw a new mechanization emerge.

The gears winnowed potentials, and through that separation came the false dichotomy of better and worse, of higher and lower, of that and this. Then the gears churned out the subsequent and inevitable response. Pug pictured some cornered creature amongst its own, calculating if it should attack, or if it should run, leaving a slower cousin to be devoured in its place.

A blink later, Hamilton turned away from his inquisitor.

“More like leave it in good hands,” the man said.

They finished their beers in murmurs and shook hands. Pug told him he’d call him if he was in the market for some property, and to that Hamilton let out a cackle that rippled the lingering suds spilt on the bartop.

After Hamilton limped out the exit, Pug waited a beat before he scurried outside to follow behind.



BY MADS LUDVIGSEN.

Chapter Twelve

A FINAL SLIVER from the setting sun shot between two mid-rises and blinded Pug in one eye. He winked it shut, and the limping Hamilton at the end of the block lost a dimension.

Wind spat easterly from the bay and funneled up Washington Street. It ripped open Hamilton's coat so it flapped with the sound of a shuffled deck of cards and peeled up a wisp of his jet-black hair. He licked his first three fingers and patted it back down into place. The sun set and Pug snapped open his eye, and watched all three dimensions of Hamilton stagger across Washington, north on Sixth.

Pug bolted to the parking meter, where he'd tied a chain around his bike in a confusing knot to ward off prospective thieves. Hamilton turned onto Jefferson and disappeared behind the corner building. Pug pedaled into the street to better his angle, but when the block opened up for him, Hamilton had disappeared. Pug dropped his feet onto the asphalt and muttered a confused, "Shit..." under his breath.

A Black man with a crinkled face came pacing quickly up Jefferson. He wore a filthy, bent ballcap and his mouth was all gums. He held out an outstretched a paper cup, and it shook with a constant tremor that made the coins inside clink faintly.

Pug fished out quarters and dimes from the front pocket of his jeans and they chimed inside the cup. The man continued his path to the sea undisturbed, without acknowledgement.

“No need to thank me,” Pug grinned.

The man’s clicking footsteps were overtaken by a ghastly crunch echoing through the street. Pug found its origin: a clandestine parking garage, its door yanked up. A four-door sedan painted pure black peeled out, and the garage door sprung back down and slammed against the concrete in metallic carnage. Pug saw the silhouette of the driver, still trying to pat down his gust-struck tuft of hair. He followed the car.

They turned right on 11th, left on Broadway, then straight for a mile. Traffic had congested at the end of rush hour, forcing Pug onto the sidewalk. With the sedan’s forced stops and Pug’s own reckless weaving through the pedestrian mass, our hero kept pace.

The mismatched caravan passed Grand, on their right a shuttered, run-down diner behind cyclone fencing like some stranded spacecraft. It awaited demolition, then the condos to follow. The sedan turned right at the liquor store, and Pug followed despite the luring wafts from the taco truck. They passed the parking lot of the Grocery Outlet and, at its edge, Pug saw Harriet’s forest green Volvo, its Kony 2012 bumper sticker highlighted by the parking lot halogens. There were a few minutes still left on her shift today: stocking wine under the tutelage of Steve the Wine Guy.

The sedan crept up a hill and Pug strained behind. They wound through the curved, sloping roads of the neighborhood thicket where canopied trees hid the stars, and in the night’s hazy grays and blacks, Pug used the sedan’s rear reds to guide his way. The brake lights flashed on and the sedan pulled to the side. Pug ditched his bike on a lawn, and watched Hamilton hobble up the perfectly-landscaped walkway of a three-story brick Tudor.

A “For Sale” sign had been planted into the manicured lawn, announcing its location as “Lovely, Quaint Piedmont,” despite being situated well beyond what constituted the socially-accepted boundaries. Pug huffed a, “My ass...” and watched Hamilton yank the sign from the ground and tuck it under his arm. Hamilton painfully corrected the limp from his hip

and knocked on the front door. A young white couple—him with glasses and beard, her with dimples and blonde hair to her shoulders—welcomed him inside.

Pug thumbed his phone to Harriet's number and called. She picked up while humming that Otis Redding song that regularly blasted from Grocery Outlet's loudspeaker.

"Off soon?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Need your help," he said. "I'm nearby."

A little while later, the Tudor's front door opened, and Hamilton huffed out, now without the sign. He got back inside the sedan and started it. As Pug mounted his bike, he heard the rumbling engine of Harriet's Volvo. It wouldn't make the most inconspicuous tailer, but beggars v. choosers. He mashed his bike into the trunk and used a bungee to secure it, then hopped into the passenger seat. "You want me to follow that car?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"No, I mean... c'mon, where's my damn inspiration!"

"Oh." He authoritatively pointed at the last glimpse of the sedan's taillights before they turned the corner. "FOLLOW THAT CAR!"

The sedan circled back to Broadway, angled onto Piedmont Avenue, righted onto MacArthur, then the 580 heading east. Harriet followed as near as her sputtering Volvo would allow.

"Hold on a sec," she said. "Any good adventure needs a good soundtrack." She reached below her seat and unearthed a CD. She popped it into her deck, and tabbed to track 12. The false start of a drum beat, then the thick synthesizer beat, the claps, the tinny sound of a funk guitar lick, and the rest of The Coup stormed the castle with their guillotine.

"Now, we hunt!" she screamed.

The sedan exited Fruitvale and drove for miles into the warehouse rows. Then it turned down a street, utterly deserted save a thick band of white light streaming from a still-open office front. It parked and Hamilton stepped out, his face bathed in the white brightness. He opened the glass door and walked inside. Harriet stealthily parked a block behind, in the dark between two streetlights.

"Wait here," Pug said. "You know, if you want."

“Of course, kid,” she said.

He reached into the back seat, repurposed as Harriet’s closet, and snatched a maroon Starter jacket and A’s cap. He costumed up and crossed the street to keep a safe distance, hugging the fencing that protected some new development, and approached the white light.

He angled his head, taking in a bold red sign that read GENTRY REALTORS. Through the glass doors was a long, high desk, and the half-circle of a brunette bob poked up from behind it.

Pug scurried through the light and pitched back into darkness, crossed back to the office side of the street, and hurdled the chain-link fence into the alley next to the target. He came to a window, its open blinds casting horizontal bars onto the brick wall opposite. Pug peered through and saw an enormous map of Oakland hung up, polka-dotted with red push-pins. He pressed his nose against the glass for a closer look, but a sudden crash startled him into a ducking position.

Pug peeked up and saw another set of blinds smashed into a thick mass against the windowpane. Someone was being pressed against them. Pug crept and heard muffled voices inside. “Don’t fuck this up,” he made out, absolutely sure it was Hamilton. The person was released, and the bars of light regained their form in the alleyway. Pug glimpsed inside, but only saw Hamilton’s final, halting step as he exited the office.

Pug retraced his steps, hopped the fence, and returned to the Volvo. As he did, Hamilton flung open the office’s glass door, entered the sedan, and pulled such an instant U-turn that it was already upon the Volvo before they could do anything. Pug ducked, Harriet froze in place.

“He’s not a damn T-Rex,” Pug said from the passenger leg well.

“He’s looking right at me,” Harriet said through shut teeth.

“Just play it cool,” Pug whispered.

“Oh that fucking helps,” she hissed back.

She held focus on some distant point, waited for the sedan to pass, and eyed its exit in her rearview. She waited a beat before slamming her foot on the gas to power her own tight, squealing U-turn, and the force slammed Pug deep into the bed of fast food wrappers collected on the ground over the past year and

change.

“Hold on tight, I guess I should’ve warned you,” she said, smiling.

They followed the black car on International, heading west. As the sedan neared each street corner, as if summoned by its approach, a lone woman, shivering in her short skirt, would fade into existence with two staggered steps into the amber tint of the street’s sodium lights. And when the sedan passed, each one of them retreated back into the darkness again, like waves pulled back into the suction of the ocean.

The pair drove to the lake, left at 1st, into downtown and a right at 8th, toward the concrete jumble where the 880 met the 980. The sedan slowed to a stop.

From a block back, they saw Hamilton limp through a split in the fence and into the tent encampment beyond. He pulled back the opening of one tent, spoke a few words to the man inside, and handed over a plastic container of leftovers. The man gobbled down the noodles inside as Hamilton returned to his vehicle.

The cars zigged into West Oakland. Hamilton took a sharp right, but when the Volvo did the same, the sedan had disappeared completely. They’d lost him.

“Shit,” Pug said. He ran to the trunk and pulled out his bike. “Let’s split up. Call me if you see him.”

He rode three blocks before realizing where he was at. He played a hunch, took a left, and saw the three-story Victorian where he’d found Sam’s body. What had been left of it, anyway. The lights were off inside, but the black sedan was parked in front.

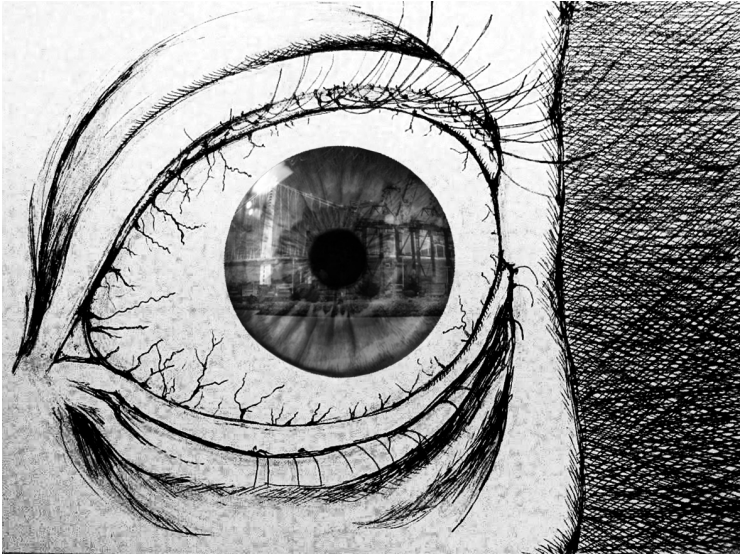
Pug stuck his bike behind a dumpster and crept into the Victorian’s back yard. He ducked through the maze of barrels, filled to the brim, rainwater hovering over the edges. He glimpsed Hamilton’s silhouette limp past the third floor window, the room looking out to the bridges, the one where Sam sunk into his last nod.

Pug waited for the coast to clear and ambled up the back wooden staircase. He quietly twisted the knob, and pushed it open onto the first floor’s grand hallway. He closed the door gently, and upon turning back around, he saw the shape of a man.

It approached quickly into an errant ray of moonbeam, and Pug vaguely recognized him.

“Hey...” Pug began.

But in an instant the shape was upon him, and a fierce strike to the side of his skull sent Pug falling to the ground and then into blackness.



BY S. FERNÁNDEZ & DANIEL TCruz.

Chapter Thirteen

PUG OPENED HIS EYES and a rush of bright hot migraine bright pierced in.

Great mammoths guarding against enemies beyond the moat turned into the monstrous white cranes of the Oakland harbor. The bridges shimmered into focus, one with the morning reds of the exodus, the other vacant steel in the new dawn.

He sucked in a breath, and on his slow exhale he recognized the specific angle of the view.

His fingers traced the wooden handles of Sam's old chair in Sam's old room, and he felt an awkward tug from the inside of his elbow. He looked and found a syringe.

His muscle flexed at the sight and straightened the needle so it quivered like an arrow hitting a target. He yanked it out, and the pull arched a spurt of blood onto the dirt-brown carpet. He clasped his hand over the throbbing pinhole.

Out the window, the bridges blurred into a fog, then sharpened, then fogged again.

He knew it was the drugs they shot him up with, whatever they were.

Pug scanned his memory and the last thing there was the

moonlit brute who overtook him like a streak of lightning in that old Victorian—this old Victorian. He'd seen the muscle before, at that place they called the Fallout Shelter. He was in the boxing ring tossing aside all-comers, the blacked-out tats on his arms shining under the warehouse lights.

They'd called him Spike.

He'd do anything for a buck.

Pug snapped open his eyes and Spike's chrome dome faded from his synapse-twisted vision and then disappeared. Pug wiped his eyes and tried to stand, but fell to the carpet. He ground his head into the brown fibers and it felt like a scalp massage. He reached to where the needle had been stuck and felt a bubble the size of a pea. It throbbed. When he pressed, it stung. He angled himself to a kneeling position for who knows how long as he tried to breath through whatever drug he was on. He finally raised his head.

A chaotic assembly of loose photos covered the wall, each stuck through with a red push pin. Pug crawled forward and found one of Mercia at face level. She was smiling in an alleyway, and the backlit sun filtered through her curled hair to coat the lens in a psychedelic glaze.

Pug tore the photo off, the red pin left behind.

From the speck of red came three faint parallel pencil lines that soon merged into one. It angled at forty-five degrees up and to the right. Pug traced it with his spider-walking fingers until his greasy prints rested on another photo. It was an image taken from across an empty street, a hill deep in the background. A tall man with gray sideburns and a dominant nose was walking with a brown paper sack of groceries. He was blurry with motion, but looked familiar to Pug, though he couldn't place him.

Another pencil line took Pug's finger to black-and-white newspaper print that'd been torn from a crinkled East Bay Express. Another routed him to a Google Image print-out of a four-story mansion with enough clumsy additions to look like Sarah Winchester's ramshackle side project. He stood, waited for his woozy brain to coalesce, and took in the sprawling conspiratorial tableau before him. Links upon links upon links, conclusions found but who knew the questions.

"The hell you been up to, Sam?" Pug muttered.

A creak in the floor nearby shook him back into the moment.

It came from next door. Pug twisted open Sam's door and walked into a spray of floating dust that hovered in the hallway.

"Hello?" he called, and was answered by another creak. "Shit," he said with resignation.

He pushed open the door and held a fist up for protection. It opened into another bedroom. Under the boarded window at the far end was a dirty mattress. On top were blankets bunched over a sleeping figure that slightly shifted with breath. Pug's weight creaked a floorboard, and the figure's motion became a frantic flurry, out of which scurried a rat from under the covers. It ran through a crack in the window and left behind a bloody trail.

"Come the fuck on already," Pug said.

He slowly approached the pile, now completely still, and lifted the blanket. It caught on the tip of a needle, and Pug carefully unwound the mess. He continued lifting and was left standing over what was once the man he'd met named Reggie.

The rat had gnawed through his prized Raiders Super Bowl t-shirt, through his dark skin, into the red gristle below. Pug caught a whiff of spoiled meat and gagged a sputtering cough to the floor.

He staggered out the door, still coughing.

When he caught his breath, he heard obscured voices coming from somewhere downstairs. He took the stairs two at a time into the kitchen. It was hazy in the dusk except for the blast of fluorescent blue light in the corner coming from the fridge's open door.

He took a wide berth around the kitchen island in a careful arc to advance his view, and he winced as he found the splayed feet. They were downward-pointing so he could see their dirty soles. Pug approached the head, and he now saw it was propping open the fridge door, its interior empty save six different ketchup bottles.

It was Latch, the margarita fanatic.

A trail of white-yellow drool had pooled below her open mouth and spread through the creases between the tiles. He found another needle nearby.

Pug reached for his phone.

Gone.

He walked to the wall phone and lifted it from its receiver.

Dead.

He rested his elbows on the island and looked down to Latch's body. In his drug-spiked state, it splintered in three and then four before merging back into one. He closed his eyes, steadied his breath, and heard an odd sputtering start outside. It was like the engine of a gas guzzler aching to life.

Voices encouraged it, but their cheers were quickly overtaken by its seismic rumble.

Pug was walking to the window to take a look when the wall itself exploded in front of him.



BY YUNG COCONUT.

Chapter Fourteen

THE BOARDS ON THE WINDOWS snapped with the ease of dry twigs. What followed was the most deafening sonic boom Pug had ever heard.

Plaster chunks exploded and from their jagged chasms came plumes of smoke. Pipes scattered like spooked snakes. Through the chaos entered a metallic orb like an alien probe, and Pug ducked down behind the kitchen island. Through a twinkling spray of shards, Pug watched the giant ball swing to the end of its tether, halt in mid-air, and draw back through the hole it'd made in the wall.

"Fuck!" he screamed, and scurried on hands and knees to the basement door.

Another explosion behind him and he rolled down the planks of the makeshift stairs, his body smacking flush against the basement concrete. His eyes blurred with some combination of the drugs and his new concussion, then focused on Dave's empty bed, still tucked in the corner. He climbed out the window he'd once fallen through, stumbled into the morning sun, high-stepped through the tall glass, and climbed over a temporary fence bordering the yard.

He turned and watched the wrecking ball splinter the rest of the Victorian into mismatched pieces, then nothing at all.

Pug went to his knees to cough up dust, and when he regained his breath, a tanned man with mustache and orange hard hat stood over him.

“You okay?” the man said, nodding at the rubble. “You were in there?”

Pug nodded.

The man picked up his radio and spoke in a hushed voice. Pug followed his eye-line to the crew gathered around the idled wrecking ball. Among the orange hats, one in sunglasses spoke into his own radio.

Pug patted more dust off his jacket and glanced at the fence around the former structure, staked by signs claiming ownership by Gentry Realtors, each with its own sharp, angled man throwing a fastball into the future.

“Got it,” the man said, set his radio down, and approached Pug in the hesitant toe-tipping of a dog-catcher figuring the angles.

“What are you doing?”

No reply.

Pug heard the white noise of gravel being trampled, and turned to see the wrecking ball crew in a full sprint toward him. He flung a punch at the man, a grazing blow enough to unsteady him, and Pug ran off. He ducked into the alley, found his bike hidden behind the dumpster, and pedaled off.

He made it one block east into the blinding sun, swiveled, saw the workers slow to a jog and then a defeated stumble-walk. Pug’s exhale of relief sputtered as two black sedans peeled into the street and began their own pursuit.

His foot slipped and skidded against the concrete, and the bike wobbled over a curb and into a patch of dead grass. His knee dug into the dirt and he flipped on his back. A moment of ringing in his ears, then car doors opened near enough for Pug to hear the ding-ding-ding of the seat belt warning. He lifted his bike from the lawn, and huffed a sprint. Behind him, the popping clips of well-heeled shoes on asphalt closed the distance.

He double-hopped and whipped his right leg over the seat of his bike. His feet somehow perfectly fell on the pedals and caught. He heard his pursuers scamper back, then the slamming

of car doors and screeching of tires.

He turned south then east, repeating evasive maneuvers through improvised alleys and sidewalks, over grassy medians, through strip mall parking lots. He passed some Baptist church set deep in the neighborhood on the corner of something and something, and then dipped under a highway overpass where tents had been newly pitched. He ditched his bike and crawled into the encampment.

From behind a white tarp, he eyed the sedans as they drove past. There was Hamilton, seated in the passenger seat. His dark sunglasses reflected the tents as he searched, and then he looked directly at Pug and smiled.

Pug fell to the ground and cursed himself. He waited for the inevitable with his face smashed against the dirt, and when it didn't come an hour later, he hesitantly stood up, then collected his bike and rode home. He fell through his apartment building's back entrance in awkward haste and knocked over a cardboard booth full of tourist brochures, apparently installed by the new management. The trifold pitches for overpriced Coit Tower and Alcatraz tours spilled onto the floor, and he left them for someone else to pick up.

Pug crept into his apartment and lodged as many loose bits of furniture behind the door as he could, wedging his bike between the walls of his thin hallway as one final bit of resistance. He fell into bed and, in another hour, finally shut his eyes.

The shadow left by the setting sun fell down the white wall and struck Pug's closed lids. They fluttered open and he wiped out the gunk that'd collected. He reached for his phone, realized it was lost, and crawled to his laptop. There was an email from Mercia. There was going to be a memorial service for Sam at The Avenue, starting at six. The desktop clock told him that meant a few minutes ago.

Pug bird-bathed to a proper sheen, unwound his makeshift barricade, and carried his bike down the stairwell and out the door.

Outside under the haze of purples and blues, Pug heard a brass section blaring. "Goddamn," he muttered, remembering it was a First Friday, the art showcase that dominated Telegraph Ave. once a month with milling gawkers. It'd peaked years ago, before it went all to hell. He navigated his bike through the

crowd that'd gathered near the overpriced food trucks, then rode north, away from the shit-show.

He pedaled the slight uphill past Commonwealth, then Walgreens, under the overpass where someone had spray-painted "Ohlone Land," past the skeletal beginnings of the new parking garage outside of MacArthur BART, between paint stores, and finally to the brick exterior of The Avenue. Out front was a sign warning: "First Friday? Keep movin'!"

Pug leaned his bike against a parking meter and knotted his cable in a guise of security.

He walked past two bearded guys who were smoking and eyeing the balcony above the entrance, where a pair of plastic skeletons had been displayed, one in a Raiders hat, one in an A's. "Believe this shit," one smoker to the other. "Halloween's coming earlier and earlier." Pug walked in.

The Avenue's interior had already been fully decked out in decoration, too. Cobwebs were strewn about, two-foot strands of chains hung from the ceiling. A chandelier was overtaken by skeletal forms, a red-lit devil with a 666 hung above the bar, and a lonely Pinhead came to life with a strobe sat in a dank corner. Behind the bar, top shelf vodka was backlit by an ethereal green neon.

Pug slapped five to Patrick behind the bar. He was a wiry Black dude with thick-rimmed glasses who spoke fast with a grizzled voice and easy laugh.

"Thought you'd be around for this," he aimed to the pool table, where the mourning crowd had gathered. The miniature cemetery that rested on the table during the season had been deconstructed to allow space for the pizzas. Patrick set two shot glasses on the bar and poured whiskies. "Here you go, my man." They doubled-tapped, downed the shots, and Patrick made some crack about getting back to his fucking drunks.

Pug made his way Mercia, wearing a black sweater, holding court with four people Pug had never seen. Her eyes were puffy and red with a glaze of tears. She finished her story and hugged Pug.

"Heading back down soon?" he asked.

"Few more days of grieving," she said, "then back south."

"Sorry I didn't get to him in time," Pug said.

"Did you find out who got him, Milo?"

“Haven’t,” Pug said. “Not yet. Been a weird few days.”

She gently pushed Pug back to take him all in, smiled with her lips shut in a way he couldn’t read. She kissed his forehead and turned back into the memorial.

Pug hung for a drink and bullshitted with Patrick, who bought him another. He spied Mercia smiling through another gloss of tears and left The Avenue.

He let the declining slope of Telegraph take him down the thoroughfare, avoiding potholes as he glided. At 29th Street, he angled left and tipped his bike for safe-keeping in the parking lot behind Commonwealth Pub. He sat for a few silent pints amongst the First Friday crowd, hounded Lizzy behind the bar for a cigarette, coastered the top of his beer and stumbled outside.

On the corner, his dizzied eyes examined the vacant lot kiddie-corner, who, I’ll tell you, was a bit hesitant about its own fate, skeptical about the development to take place.

Pug put the cigarette between his lips and then remembered he didn’t have a light.

He scanned for smokers and saw the hovering firefly of a burning ember around the corner. Pug wandered over to the figure.

“Got a light?”

The figure retrieved a neon green lighter from his front pocket and flicked a flame. Pug leaned forward with the cigarette and mumbled a thanks out of the corner of his mouth.

“Anything for an old friend,” the figure said.

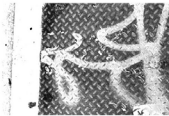
Pug looked up, and at the end of the flame was goddamn Sam, that motherfucker, right there in the goddamn flesh.

He removed his hoodie to expose his smooth, bald, Black head.

“Brother,” Sam smiled. “Have I got a story for you.”

Part III

Evictions, Actual & Constructive



BY TRAVIS TARR.

Chapter Fifteen

THE SPECTER STARING BACK, Pug shock-sputtered a puff of cigarette smoke. It was amplified into a billowing cloud by the cool night air and caught the corner lamp outside the bar, swooping away in goodbye like some glowing phantasmic entity. It floated out to Telegraph Ave. and Sam's smooth face was again revealed.

"Been hella long, Pug," this man, Sam himself, said. "Probably owe you an explanation or a dozen."

A smirk appeared deep enough to dimple Sam's left cheek.

Pug nodded and squinted through his previous state of grieving drunkenness, drew in heavily to finish off his cigarette, and extinguished it under the heel of his black Converse.

"Let me guess," Pug said, gnawing on the end of his overhung mustache. "I'm the first person for whom you've risen yourself from the dead."

"Been forced to keep a hazy profile due to some recent events."

"Y'know," Pug twisted his head and tapped his forefinger and thumb together in a nervous tic as the pitch of his voice rose. "I just came from a gathering held in honor of you croaking, and since it seems you ain't croaked, you may owe your sis, at the very least, some money for your memorial pizzas."

“Check’s in the mail,” Sam said.

A moment of still was broken by the frame-rattling bass of a passing car, and Pug lurched into Sam for an embrace. He held the back of Sam’s bald head in his hands like a lover, and Sam breathed into our hero’s shoulder with what felt like relief. They held long enough to produce a warmth more wildfire than hearth, but in the end it was a shorter hug than both would remember.

Another moment, and Pug pushed away to examine Sam’s face. He saw a softening in his eyes, and behind it an indication that the Lazarus shock was now over for them both. It was time to start speaking the situation’s truth.

“I’m in trouble, Pug,” he said. “Real kind, no-joke type of shit.”

“I sure as hell better hope so.”

“I’ve done bad shit for some bad people, now they’re trying to shut me up,” Sam said. “That hot shot murder you found in West Oakland, that guy with his face gnawed off by a rat? Was a friend of mine. Eugene. He was shooting up a gift from me, one that I was previously given by these sinister types I mentioned.”

“You using again?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” Sam said. “I told ‘em I was, but that was only bullshit I was spinning. When they come around the camps looking for workers, they’re only looking for users. It’s the only way to get the gig, and more importantly, the indoor place that comes with the gig. If I told ‘em I was clean, they’d have sent me back to my tent and found someone who wasn’t.”

“Slow down a sec,” Pug said. “What happened to that place in Jack London?”

“Lost it when I lost that café gig, when the new owners came in,” Sam replied. “Had a month of no hits on the job market so I got kicked out. Crashed around for a bit, a friend lent me a tent to use in his backyard, got kicked out by his landlord, so I took the tent on the road where I could.”

“You couldn’t get money from your folks? Or go back and live with them?” Pug attempted. “Head down to your sister’s? Fuck man, you could’ve stayed with me.”

“I’m sick of all that couch-surfing, guilt-collecting shit, Pug,” muttered Sam with disgust. “I know, I know, but you don’t get how it is. Needed to try something else.”

“What was this gig anyhow?”

“Shady shit. You go work for them and they take care of your pad, but man, you got to...” he trailed off with a seething chuckle and shake of his head. “I’ll tell you one day, maybe.”

“Day’s not too bad today.”

“I need to clean it off my conscience first,” Sam said, full stop.

“Can you at least tell me who these lowlives are?”

“Some powerful movers in the city. This dude Coletti’s got this foundation where he’s drafting kids, some slave trade sort of shit.”

“Wait, slow down again for me,” Pug said. “Who the fuck’s Coletti?”

“Got no time to get into every last particular,” Sam peered into the darkness of 29th Street and backed a few steps further into the shadows. “They got eyes, and they always seem to know when I’m peeping my head out.”

“You’re safe with me,” Pug said. “I got someone I trust at the public defender’s office. We’ll sort this out.”

“Oh Pug,” he said, “Pug, you have no idea...”

He trailed off into a knowing smile of defeat, and you could tell by Pug’s expression that he’d not yet realized he was operating in a different dimension, with not only entirely new angles but foreign rules that contradicted basic truths like gravity and solid earth beneath one’s feet. But those abstractions came a bit closer to consciousness when Sam’s smile dripped into a hardened scowl at some mystery in the construction yard kiddie-corner from where they stood.

“Shit,” Sam sputtered, looking past him. “Goddamn.”

Pug whipped around but saw nothing in the gothic shadows of the skeletal metal and boards. And then a passing cloud above gave way enough to allow moonlight to pour over the site, and two dark forms materialized from the gray, standing there, watching in perfect stillness.

“Who’s that?” Pug asked as he turned back to Sam, but his Lazarus friend had already sprinted halfway down the block.

Pug stared at the twin shadows, who momentarily came into light as men in orange hard hats, and then quickly retreated back into the cover of darkness. Pug backed away, then turned and sprinted toward Sam’s loud, echoing footfalls.

“Sam, wait!” he screamed.

Pug weaved through sporadic walkers, pulling wisps from the smoking patio of the Legionnaire Saloon in his wake's suction. He got to 27th, but when he did, the light turned green and the traffic funneling away from the chaos of First Fridays became a moving wall he couldn't pass.

Beyond the sheen of this metallic blockade, he saw the purple from Sam's hoodie streak through the food truck crowd, and then it was gone.

The light changed, and Pug rushed across the wide boulevard into the sweaty, fleshy miasma from the crowds. Past the food trucks were, in various states of tear-down, tent-protected tables on either side of the street. Between this action, Pug spotted a purple streak flash down 25th street, into a street filled with strobing light and bubbles. A mobile rave had taken over the block. Deep bass, a heavily-bearded DJ, some random person pedaling an archaically-souped up bicycle that generated power for the strobe, scattered glow sticks, a hovering cloud of impenetrable pot smoke. Pug ran full steam into this dancing mass.

He shoved a raver, who fell onto his partner, who fell onto the next, and like dominos they all toppled onto the pavement in an entanglement of beads and tight jeans. As the dancers struck the ground in a chorus of banshee yells, the block opened up before him.

At the end of this new openness, Pug could tell immediately for damn sure, was that dickwad Spike who'd knocked him the fuck out only a night before. Strange coincidences.

The bald brute was turned toward the other end of the rave, bouncing to the music with an ample radius of empty space surrounding him. Nearby revelers had learned to give the big man his space.

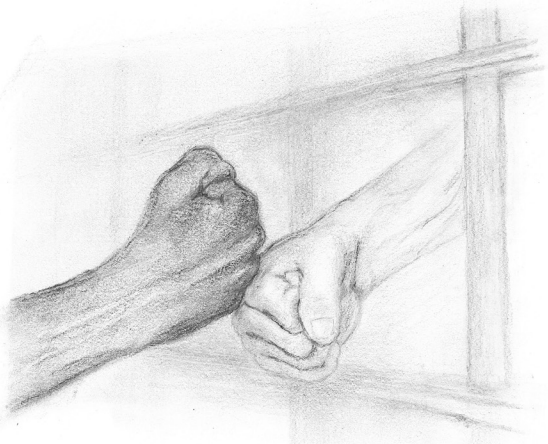
Pug twisted behind a shoulder to hide his face, and, with a loose one-two step, blended in amongst those ravers still standing and bouncing. He backtracked and dipped his hand into a trash can and grabbed an empty beer bottle.

In the darkness, Pug shrugged against the wall and headed to Spike. He poked an eye up and saw that Spike was still looking elsewhere. He darted into the street, swung the bottle up over his head, and brought it soaring down on Spike's skull, which cracked with a red splatter. He fell face down into a clump on the street, splintering his nose into a splash of blood

against the asphalt.

“You motherfucker!” Pug screamed, about to lunge onto the prone man with the sharpened edge of the bottle that was left behind. But before he could, his body stiffened, his teeth clenched, and he received what felt like the popping smacks of at least thirty men with baseball bats who’d gathered to simultaneously strike him from behind.

Pug saw the ground rising up to meet him, again, then saw nothing, again.



BY PASCAL BOUCHARREINE.

Chapter Sixteen

“**YOU, OF COURSE, DO KNOW,**” a raspy voice croaked like gargled glass, interrupting Pug’s frantic visions, in which he’d been falling off some metallic beast into a blue haze. “If your ass was Black, you wouldn’t be having them nightmares you’re having, because your ass would’ve been a damn dead ass.”

The speaker’s cackle rattled against the bars of the cage.

Pug awoke into the brightness of the jail overhead beams, and he felt each vertebrae of his spine spark as each lifted from the hard bench where he lay. He twisted into a sit, and the stuttering vertical waves hovering ahead focused into solid steel bars. He turned and saw a hunched old Black man smirking in the next cell over.

“Not that I wish you dead, kid,” the man said. “But this’s something you got to know, and now seems an opportune time to teach it.”

“A worthwhile lesson,” Pug groaned, booze still pluming from his breath. He stretched a hand behind him to massage the knots, and with the tightness of the twist he became astounded at how many goddamn muscles there were back there in the human body. “My lesson to your ass is, if anyone offers you the chance to get tased, don’t take it.”

The man's cackle again throbbed in Pug's brain.

Pug climbed into the jigsaw chaos of last night's memory, and found that fucker Spike on the pavement with a bloodied face. After that, the world stopped completely and seemed to last forever as the surge of electricity coursed through his nerves. Then: Flashes of stout arms, a weightless float in the wash of cycling reds and blues, the slam of a car door. A narrative took shape, and the puzzle was soon solved. He drifted back into sleep, until his neighbor—whose laugh still shook the window panes as it flicked the hangover blade carving into Pug's head—woke him.

"Name's Royce Grace," the man offered a hand between the bars.

Pug squinted.

"Shit, I think I know you or something," Pug said. "Name like that's tough to forget." And then he remembered why. "Hard across the tongue," he repeated. "Oh shit, I do know you."

Pug recounted the gig that public defender April had given him a week prior, obtaining those still-fresh-the-day-after testimonial details from the landlord—or former landlord, Pug couldn't quite remember—who Royce had roughed up nice and good for some other thing he couldn't recall.

"They tried to plea my ass down to a fine and some months of community service, but those kinds of fuckers don't get two things about my life." Royce smiled, and the cracks around his eyes branched like lightning bolts. "One, don't have money for a fine. Two, don't have time neither, 'cause I got to make the money I don't have."

The bolts retreated and he slowly ached down into a sit.

"Ain't the point, anyhow," he said. "Can't take away a man's mama's home for no reason, then say he did something wrong. Can't stand for that shit, no sir."

Royce talked him through the whole escapade.

His mom, Lydia, had been in that Temescal apartment, first floor around back, for 25 years. She'd moved in with her husband, Royce's father Harold, after their three boys had been brought up and turned out, Royce being the last one out the door. Lydia and Harold had a house in the flats but wanted to downsize. Part money considerations, part looking to avoid being the fall-back option whenever their sons got into a tiff

with whatever girlfriend they were staying with.

“Make them work it out themselves,” Royce recounted Harold’s motto to Pug. “No need to bring us into their bullshit.”

Harold spent five years with Lydia in that one-bedroom, fixing up the backyard, scooping out the refuse, trimming the lawn, finally carving out a manicured pathway out to his new, shiny barbecue. Then the asbestos, set in his lungs during the cheap construction gigs in Richmond he had back in 50s, finally made themselves present.

He breathed his last on Highland Hospital’s 3rd floor on December 8th, 1993.

Lydia stayed on in the new home they’d been making. She didn’t want to leave because, she said, Harold was there. Literally—she wasn’t wrong. The fam tossed out one-fourth of his ashes under that beloved barbecue, then another fourth in the front yard of their family home in the flats one dark night, another fourth into the bay. The rest was poured onto the soil that surrounded the Coliseum field.

To keep Lydia company, the Grace boys would alternate stopping by for breakfast before work, on their lunch break, or for dinner on their way home. They worked it out so that between them all she never ate a single meal alone.

“One night after a shift at the port, I find some letter on her table, unopened. It was from her landlord,” Royce said. “Said she’d been running some kind of rental business out of there, some kind of illegal subletting. Said she had three days to leave. By the time I opened it, a week had already passed.”

“Like an Airbnb kind of thing?” Pug asked.

“Maybe,” Royce said. “One of those things, anyhow.”

Royce went on. While Lydia had never even logged onto the internet, the landlord’s note was full of receipts. There was the account in her name, and the names of guests who stayed there. The final line showed a sum of over \$5,000 she made that year alone.

“Bullshit, simple and pure,” Royce said. “Me and my brothers tried to figure it out, but got nowhere. Even called that internet place, and they had the same info in their system. According to their records, one Lydia Grace residing at that address had been renting out her apartment for a few years by then. Anyway, the next day we got a call saying the sheriffs were kicking her out,

so we went on over," he sighed. "Didn't want trouble from those boys, y'know."

The three brothers boxed her up and moved her out, and after that hell of a day, halfway through his single beer for the evening, Royce was struck by the grand idea of visiting his mom's landlord.

"He told me he didn't have anything to do with it," Pug said. "That he'd sold the place a few months back."

"Yeah," Royce nodded. "That's what Ms. April said you said. Hadn't heard anything about that myself. But again, mama wasn't the best at keeping up on the day-to-day goings-on at the place. She paid her rent on time, kept the place tidy. What else she got to do? Anyway, if he sold it to scum that were part of this, well, then he deserves a beating for having no scruples when it comes to selling your community out."

The door clinked opened and in walked Pug's old friend Frank Harris, decked in a pristine OPD uniform, flashing a grin below his blond mustache.

Harriet came in a few steps behind.

"That assistant D.A. Labriola really wants to dig in on your ass with some extreme charges, Pug. Young'un's trying to make a name for himself," Frank said, unlocking Pug's cell and flinging open the door. "Must be your lucky day, though. Whoever you knocked around must have enough priors or standing warrants out there. He walked away without talking to police. We'd normally still keep your ass in here, but got word from on high to let you out once you make bail."

He thumbed over his shoulder to Harriet as he unlocked the cell.

"So, that's why this one's here."

"How'd you get the money for this?" Pug asked Harriet.

"Passed the hat at Commonwealth," she said, hugging Pug. "But that wasn't nearly enough. Got no friends there it seems, Puggy boy. So, went over to Eli's, then The Avenue, then The Alley, Heart and Dagger, and finally Kaye's where Ted behind the bar shrugged and dumped in his entire tip jar."

The trio moved out into the hallway, but before the door shut, Pug kicked out a foot to hold it and backtracked inside to Royce, still sitting on his bench behind the bars.

"Mind if I look into your mom's shit on my own?" Pug asked.

Royce rose up and paced to the bars. He stuck a fist out between the irons so it hung outside.

Pug silently bumped it with his own.



BY MARGO SNYDER.

Chapter Seventeen

THE THUDDING KEYBOARD sounded like distant construction, and it stirred Pug awake enough that he aimed his crusted eyes in that direction. The morning haze crept in through the western-facing blinds, coating the space in a wash of floating dust so it looked like some madman had gotten hold of disinfectant spray. And there was Harriet, hunched over his computer.

“Up yet lazy-ass?” she inquired without looking his way.

“Uh,” Pug managed.

“I’ll take that as a sign of life,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’m not judging your porn search terms.”

He rolled past the warm spot she’d left on the bed, grabbed the A’s shirsey of Dan Haren that happened to top his t-shirt pile, and wormed his way in. His sweaty bare feet pressed on and unstuck from the vinyl floor as he walked over. He put his hands on Harriet’s shoulders and rested his stubbled chin on the cushion of her hair, now dyed hot pink. She felt the coconut plugs in her earlobes vibrate with his voice.

“Whatcha up to?”

“Figuring out your case, dickwad,” she answered.

She tapped a finger once, twice on the computer screen, and

at its end was an awkwardly-converted-from-Web-1.0 page from the San Francisco Chronicle.

The wonky headline from 2006 announced NeWDeVEIOPmEnT UnDERWaY. An overexposed, blown-out-by-the-sun digital photo showed four gray-haired white guys hoisting shovels of dirt. The second of four (left-to-right): Mr. William Coletti, “a local developer,” his grin the shit-eating-est of them all.

“That guy Sam mentioned, the guy you’re looking for,” Harriet said. “He’s the only guy with the last name Coletti that’s apparently a big shit around here in Oaktown. Who knew? And dude’s even got...”—she pressed some mysterious combo of keyboard shortcuts that birthed a new browser window from some hidden space—“... a foundation of his own.”

It was another webpage, this one from a 2009 Chronicle, with a more digestible design. The headline stated: Coletti’s Crew Logs On. Pug read two mouse-scrolls down the story, gleaning from the scan that “developer and philanthropist” William Coletti had donated a more than-modest sum to create a 501(c)(3) organization known as “Coletti’s Crew©,” the copyright looming litigiously.

The org’s goal, according to the story, was giving the brightest low-income kids from around the country a boost—via free room, free board, free transportation, a stipend for discretionary spending, free advanced programming lessons—into the sector they’d been left out of: tech. The hope was to “graduate” fifty “crew-members” a year out of the program and into mid-level careers at the hottest campuses in Silicon Valley. The announcement contained two quotes each from the Bay Area’s two dominant mayors, and a non-canned remark from Governor Schwarzenegger himself.

“Guess your buddy Sam’s onto something,” Harriet said. “Though I can’t decipher what the ever-loving fuck it is.”

Pug wiped his eyes and lazily strode to the sink at the edge of his bedroom that somehow passed as a “half-kitchen” in the apartment’s listing. He cupped a gulp of water and rubbed the excess droplets on his closed eyes.

“Well, I mean,” he stuttered. “Like... maybe he’s... it’s way too early to digest any of this.”

“It’s noon.”

“Like I said.”

He bent his knees into a squat and leapt like a disabled frog over the permanent display of fast food debris and landed next to Harriet. He grabbed her in his spindly arms and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’d go for full lips, but I can’t imagine this breath is up to snuff.”

“I’ve smelled worse,” she said, and pulled his lips to hers.

They were still locked thirty seconds later when a loud triple-knock reverberated on his front door.

Pug deeply inhaled from Harriet’s neck, then pushed off to open the door. On its other side, Mercia’s face glided upward slow enough so that when her eyes met his, Pug got lost deep and distant in their one subtle blink before pulling back to see her pleading furrow.

She’d been crying, that was for sure, and with that gloss over her green eyes, they seemed to shimmer like emeralds under the surface of a bubbling stream.

“Is it true?” Mercia asked.

An hour ago, he’d left her a message from Harriet’s phone, trying to bypass the unknown number auto-ignore with a voice-mail about Sam being, well, not as dead as they’d all figured.

“What did he look like?” she asked.

Harriet walked up and took Mercia’s trembling hand, and the three sat at Pug’s laminate kitchen table that he’d found at the First Sunday antique fair on the odd island of Alameda. Pug recounted as many drunken details as he could from the other night outside Commonwealth, when Sam lit his cigarette, then bolted into the crowds. Irrelevant to anything having to do with Sam, Pug made the editorial choice to continue the story to the point when he decked out the gigantic Spike.

“You know, if you do wrong by me or mine, I make sure things are square, no matter how huge you are,” Pug casually shrugged. Harriet rolled her eyes.

After a few hours of catching-up-to-speed, delving into the double-digits of Google search pages on Coletti, ordering take-out, cracking open a few beers—and Pug casually checking the string of emails he received every Saturday addressing logistics for the pick-up softball game tomorrow at Mosswood—they’d finally hit the end of the investigative threads that could be

examined inside the apartment. Silence hovered at the question of what to do next.

“Oh, come on, Pug,” Harriet said. “Thought you’d done enough of this shit before.”

“Have a suggestion?”

“We backtrack to where we last lost our way,” she jiggled her Volvo keys.

They had another beer while a plan coalesced, and waited for sunset to head out to Fruitvale and park in the dark between street lights outside Gentry Realtors.

From the backseat, elbows perched on the shoulder rests of the two front seats, Pug peered through the windshield for movement. Soon bored, he complained about the radio.

“Can’t you do better than this?” Pug muttered. “98.1 has some breezy hits now and then.”

Mercia and Harriet both twisted inward with smirks of confused disgust, and Pug fell back into his seat, pouting.

“I don’t know, man,” he muttered. “Hall and Oates’s bullshit is better than this shit.”

Another few twists through the valueless AM signals, a conversation about how Harriet could finagle an Aux input into her beater car, and finally, thank god almighty, the office’s glass door swung open and out walked the bald Spike, a soiled bandage taped to the swollen mass above his left brow.

“He’s not as big as I thought,” Mercia pointed out as Spike crept down a nearby alley.

“Oh, come on,” Pug whispered as he ducked out the side door, crossed the street, and peeked into the alley. Spike double-clicked a key fob to unlock the middle of three black sedans, then got in.

Pug jogged back to the car, and they watched the sedan pause at the office’s front door. The glass door opened again, Hamilton limped into the backseat, and the sedan scooted off. Harriet waited a few beats before following behind.

“You’re getting good at this,” Pug said, leaning again onto the front seat shoulders.

“Wanna rec me on LinkedIn?” Harriet said. “Maybe some sketch start-up needs a jack-of-one-creepy-trade.”

The sedan headed down International, right on 5th, swerving right onto Park, left under the 580 onto MacArthur, and

pulled over outside the KFC next to the Grand Lake theater. Harriet parked at the drive-in burger shack nearby.

The sedan's front door opened and Spike walked to the crosswalk, where they saw him meet a heavy, bearded man wearing a tie-dye shirt. He was pushing a full, rattling shopping cart, and in the glint of the theater marquee lights, Pug saw the man's propeller beanie twirl in the breeze coming off Lake Merritt.

"Shit, I know that guy," Pug said, recounting the hippie he'd met days ago, June's friend who'd been reddened by the sun on the Albany Bulb. Greg was his name, Pug recalled.

They watched Spike take control of Greg's cart and park its wheels into the dirt of the flower bed outside the KFC. The brute opened the sedan's back door and ushered Greg inside.

The car started again, hanging a right on Grand, and Pug eyed the smoking congregants outside The Alley to see if he recognized any. Only Patrick the bartender, same as ever.

The two cars went past the commercial strip, up the hill and into the darkness of the residential zone. They wove left, past the hills of the cemetery, then west, and ultimately left again down MacArthur.

"We're going in a giant circle," Mercia said. "Think they're onto us?"

"Fucking maybe," Pug said.

"I don't know," Harriet calmly spoke. "And that's not just me taking pride in my work. Maybe it's just a mobile meeting room they have in there."

The sedan stopped at a red light under the 580's overhang, while the Volvo idled two cars behind in the next lane over. The screeching swell of the BART overhead filled the street as the light turned green.

The sedan peeled off, and as it entered the intersection, the backdoor flung open, ejecting Greg's stout, slumped body onto the pavement.

His propeller hat left his head and was crushed by a passing car.

Mercia screamed.



BY JESSICA WASSIL.

Chapter Eighteen

THE HUMMING WHOOSH of the departing BART dissipated into the night's fog, and in its place Mercia's scream ricocheting around the Volvo's cramped interior.

Harriet slammed on the brakes, propelling Pug into the front seats, then he rocked back onto the rear floor. From his crunched position, he pushed open the door and ran into the traffic. Mercia met him at Greg's prone body.

The old hippie was face-down on the pavement, surrounded by the traffic signal's red lights reflecting into the blood that had pooled into a pothole.

"The fuck do we do?" Pug said to Mercia.

"Help me get my ass up, is a good first step," said a muffled voice.

Greg rolled to his side, a hand stuck to his forehead. Blood trickled from a wound hidden behind his stubby fingers, so he looked like some Carnival reveler wearing a crimson half-mask. Mercia and Pug each grabbed an armpit and hefted him to a sidewalk bench. Harriet had by now joined, and the traffic flow regained normalcy.

"Shit," Pug said. "Let's get you to the hospital."

"Nah," Greg said. "I'm good, just fine. Got a cut in an

unfortunate spot, that's all."

He removed his hand from his forehead, and the wound had already coalesced into a dried patch.

"I'll get someone in camp to stitch me," Greg said. "Trust me, if I was wanted dead, they'd've made sure I left the car that way."

Mercia stepped from the darkness into the street light, and began to massage his hunched shoulders with a gentle force.

"Who were those people?" she asked.

"Business associates, I suppose," he let escape, but then a look of sudden confusion washed over his bulbous face as Mercia's hands began to dig deeper into his back. The back of his reddened neck twisted, looking like sinews of dried jerky as he escaped her grip.

"Shit, what the hell?" He turned and squinted at Pug for help, when a look of recognition swept across his face. "It's dark out here, but haven't I seen you before?"

Pug smirked and nodded.

"Come around the Bulb a few days back?" he asked, and Pug nodded again. "Looking after your friend who'd passed?"

"My brother, Sam," Mercia said. Greg opened his mouth to answer, but Mercia extended a hand to alert the old man it wasn't his turn to talk. "So," she said. "You get why we'd be interested in that ride you just got scooted from."

Greg gave them the story as best he could.

The Bulb dwellers had been evicted the day after Pug came around. A massive police and maintenance crew infiltrated around four in the morning. Flashlights glinted against the metal of the empty carts that rolled up the rocky dirt path, exiting later with newly confiscated property. Greg and Lucy packed up the gear they could, made it to Berkeley by sunrise, and pitched at the Adeline and MLK camp, near those hideous sculptures. Next day, that suit with a limp came around looking for workers.

"Just 'cause you're not in the government definition of work-force don't mean you don't have to work," Greg said. "He asked if I was using, told him I'm off it, and he began to chat up the next guy. But when I stood up, he looked me up and down, smiled, said he had other work for me if I was interested."

The droning sound of another approaching BART train flooded the area, and Greg paused his story until the train's

swell faded on its elevated course downtown.

“Gave me an address in the Grand Lake hills, told me to spend the night. ‘Where?’ An alley, in a doorway, didn’t matter,” he said. “‘Within earshot,’ was all he said. Just make sure to be seen was the thing. So, I pitched in a vacant doorway. Nothing much happened. Woke with the sun, gathered my things, and started the long way back here. It was the next night when things got weird.”

“What happened?” Mercia asked.

“That limping man pulled up, paid me a twenty from his roll, said there were five more in it for me if I stayed the night and, as he requested, just kinda go nuts this time.”

“Explain that,” Harriet said.

“The man said, do what comes natural to you kind of people,” Greg smiled. “I said, I’m kind of a chill guy. He said, not tonight you’re not. Let yourself go. Bang cans, throw bottles, piss and shit with pure abandon. I said, not sure that comes so natural. He said, figure out a way then.”

The creases in his smile faded as his forehead seemed to grow. The redness in his blotchy cheeks brightened freshly and spread across the rest of his face.

“I made one hell of a shit-storm of a ruckus that night. Like he wanted. Cans thrown onto the street. Yelling at passersby. Rattling my cart. And I actually did it—he said he’d be watching, so I had to. I dropped trou in the planter outside the house, the address I was handed, but, well, that didn’t come so natural to me. Out there a good twenty minutes, squatting down, grunting and struggling, trying to find a place of mental calm by already figuring out what I’d spend that hundo on. As I was dreaming up a meal of that fried okra at Souley Vegan, I turned around, and looking through the front window, hands cupped around her eyes to see in the outside dark, was some young girl, couldn’t’ve been more than four.”

He steadied himself with a quick inhale.

“Anyway, wasn’t worth it, not for that. Man’s got to have some dignity,” he wiped at the wetness in his eyes. “So, I packed my shit and headed back here. That’s when they picked my ass up, and seems you know the rest.”

“Why’d they pick that house?” Pug asked.

“Told you all I know,” Greg said. “Mind if we continue our

conversation on the way back to camp? Wouldn't mind having this cut looked at. Plus," he ached to a stance and then looked at Mercia, "You probably want to see that brother of yours."

"What?" Mercia shouted.

"Don't know why you thought he was dead. His tent's pitched over at camp," Greg said. "Last I checked anyhow."

Harriet gathered the Volvo and they all hopped in. They made the blocks-long drive to the encampment that'd sprouted in the grassy expanse at the Oakland/Berkeley border.

A single flood light made the row of pine trees look like they'd been dusted by a faint layer of snow, and reflected off the eight-foot-high steel letters that dumbly announced the border, Berkeley proper ending at "Here," Oakland starting over "There." Shadows moved in the flaps of canvas and vinyl that hung from the chain fence, beyond which came an anticipatory hum, then a BART train speeding out from underground onto the rising track that hovered above MLK.

Greg got out of the car first, and when he had two feet settled on the pavement, a black pit bull with a slash of white and a sloppy smile scampered over.

"My little girl!" Greg bent and picked up Poochy, letting her lick his face. He gave a few licks back himself.

"Where were you then?" came a voice from the darkness. Lucy waddled from the shadows, a scarf across her forehead, wielding some kind of spoon. "Ah, where'd your damn beanie go?"

"Lost it in the wind," Greg said, and side-barred a whispered "don't mention anything" to the group. Lucy walked to the lawn's edge to hug Greg amongst this new posse. She put her hands on his face to give it the once-over, and saw the faint cut on his forehead. "Ah hell," she said, then looked at the group and recognized Pug.

"Thought you'd turn up here sooner," she said. "C'mon, I'll show you where he's at."

The group huddled, with Pooch darting back and forth like some diplomatic liaison. Lucy said Sam hadn't been around for a few nights, but he'd told her to watch his stuff, so she guessed he'd be back.

The group's big plan, seemingly destined before the first word of it was actually spoken, was to be for Pug to spend the

night in Sam's tent. If he came back, he'd call Mercia—Harriet reticently let Pug borrow her phone. If he didn't, well, they'd try something else.

Mercia and Harriet took off, one last lick from Pooch, a goodnight from Lucy and the stitched-up Greg, and Pug zipped himself inside Sam's sleeping bag under the draping blue tarp that hung off the fence by bungee.

Against the edge where the tarp hit fence, he found a notebook. Under the phone's white light, Pug flipped through names and addresses, scrawled maps, X's in an odd constellation around the atrophied heart of Lake Merritt. He tried to make sense of it, but then the resonant tones of quiet conversation in a tent nearby set him down into sleep.

He dreamt he was atop a jumble of rocks. They formed an odd, circular mountain ridge that looked down onto a pristine lake, some natural reservoir contained by the rocks. He stepped forward into a blast of hot wind, which startled him into an awkward attempt at steadying himself against a lodged rock, but its stability gave way and it tumbled from the ridge into the blue. The frenzied butterflies in his stomach told him that he was falling. The deafening whoosh around him silenced, and he only heard a hollow, rhythmic sound.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Somehow, the rock that had loosened was following him, bouncing against the shore, sparking with each strike on the way down. Oddly calm in free-fall, he examined the faint wisps of static orange gossamer whenever the rock struck its own.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

The sound of footsteps nearby, and he felt the restraints of the sleeping bag.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

The steps reached the tarp and a darkened hand pulled it back. There was Sam's face, smiling in.

And then, instantly, as if ordered by the smile, a beam of pure white light illuminated his friend's face. A series of shouts called out "Police!" Sam squinted with shock then resignation, and the tarp dropped and Sam was gone.

Pug heard his sprinting footsteps in the dirt, and then came the screams.



BY TRAVIS TARR.

Chapter Nineteen

OVER THE COMMANDS, Pug made out the loud, spitting barks of a dog. He shifted awkwardly in the sleeping bag, and from the outside it all looked like some flinching chrysalis. He grunted, split the zipper, broke free. He ducked into a crouch, and his hesitant hand flipped up his shelter tarp's lip.

He stepped out into the chaos.

The encampment was covered from above by white lights of surveillance and intimidation. Figures shuffled with speed and purpose, from one tent or improvised abode to the next. Tenants huddled in mass for safety, warmth, and community, while officers of some jurisdiction wielding flashlights and hateful voices, collapsed the structures with boots and open fists in a sort of break-the-elegantly-handmade-piñata-for-the-cheap-sugar-inside kind of search.

They were looking for someone specific, Pug could tell.

Past the tableau of blurred movement and screams, Pug saw the cops merge into a single exiting line. The officers, maybe ten in all, were chasing some scrawny runner; before he stepped into the shadow of the BART tracks, his sweatshirt hood fell back and revealed a dark, bald head.

Sam, no doubt.

Pug joined the chase and pulled out Harriet's phone to tell Mercia about the pursuit. That was the intention, anyway. He rubbed his thumb across the touchscreen and it reacted in some mysterious computerized hiccup, but before he saw the error, Pug heard that repeating congestive hack of a dog barking. Pooch. It was soon accompanied by Lucy's high-pitched pleas.

"Stop! Stop!" she screamed. "Stop!"

Pug swiveled to two cops leaning forward, across from Lucy, who had Pooch by the collar in a faltering attempt to keep her constrained.

"Y'all got to move," one cop said. "Y'all got to pick up your shit, move along."

"Move along, shitheads!" screamed the other. "Clean up! Move it the fuck out!"

"That's what we're doing!" Lucy said. "That's what we're doing."

"Not fast enough!" the second cop screamed.

He lifted his boot and kicked Lucy in the shoulder, crumpling her back onto the matted, rotten grass. Real bad move, the cop knew right away, you could see it in his face.

Lucy's grasp on the collar slipped off, so the newly freed Pooch leapt into the cop's lap and sunk her teeth deep into the thigh bone. A singular spurt of blood arched, angelically lit from OPD's shower of pale light, and Lucy screamed again, this time a raw, piercing gargle that rode on the cotton puff of breath in the cool night, up into the fog and out across the bay.

Pug ran back and watched the other cop pull his taser with a huff of resignation and jam it against Pooch's side. A soft electronic rattle like a distant jackhammer accompanied the twin flickers of blue light that spurting into her. Pooch fell in a heap.

Lucy pulled herself to her unconscious dog, heaving on her side. Pug saw an odd movement flash behind the cops, then saw Greg's bulbous frame run smack against the cop who'd kicked Lucy, who he was now face to face, eye to eye, with as they lay on the ground, in a sweet and bitterly brief moment of calm before the entire squad rushed and piled onto the mess, chaotic again.

Only then did Pug realize he'd accidentally been filming the whole time.

"You know," April said, half a day later in the OPD's hallway. "Maybe you want to save this 'get out of jail free' card you lucked

into for a more urgent matter?”

“With these clowns, I’ll have another card coming soon enough.”

The door stenciled with “Evidence” opened, and out walked a cop with her blonde hair in a ponytail. She had a coarse rope around her wrist, and she softly whispered behind her. “C’mon,” she said, tapping on her thighs, “c’mon now.”

Out trotted Pooch, waddling with a tail wag that, when she recognized Pug, bounced even faster.

“Maybe even use your card on a, you know, human?” April said.

Pooch sprinted ahead to meet Pug, tall wagging excitedly with a butt shake that looked as though her rear end was about to separate and Pug went to meet her. They crumpled into a wrestling heap and Pooch playfully bit Pug’s forearm. The cop handed over the rope to April without a word, and went back to whatever next was to complicate her shift.

“See? You kiddin’ me?” Pug pled to April as he pulled back on Pooch’s jowls to showcase some version of a smile. “Greg can use a few days to cool off, anyhow. There’s no greater urgency than springing this little one first.”

“They said Greg’ll be out in three days,” April said. “Would’ve been a hell of a lot longer, but you must’ve captured something quite extraordinary on that camera of yours. They’ll keep him comfortable now, too, because of that.”

“Don’t know what I must’ve gotten,” Pug said. “They’ve been beating on folks awhile.”

“If I had insight into the mindset of OPD to understand the motives behind half their moves, I’d,” April hesitated, “Well, I wouldn’t be rich, sure, but I’d have more time for leisure.”

“Ever hear of a dude named Coletti?” Pug asked.

“William?” April said.

“Yeah, something like that,” he said. “Something Sam’s been working on, but don’t know much else. We were interrupted before I could inquire further.”

“If it’s William, then you’re talking about the biggest developer in town. Runs a bunch of firms. H&H, Bundy Housing, Bedco, Gentry—”

“Gentry, no shit,” Pug said. “Know anything about some foundation of his? Sam was interested in it.”

“That juvie-to-jobs program he’s got?” April said. “Big deal for the city. Lots of positive press. Mayor drags it up and boosts that signal whenever something’s fucked, which isn’t rare around here. Not entirely sure what they do. Something about teaching poor kids to code or whatever. Getting them the proper American Education, copyright about 2002, that needed to compete in today’s competitive job environment, what-not and so-forth.”

Clicks from Pooch’s paws echoed through the hall as they walked to the exit.

“Funny you should mention this,” April said. “Got an invitation to this big charity fundraiser that very foundation is putting on this very night.”

“No shit. Kismet or whatever. Where is it?”

“Out at Fairyland.”

“No shit, indeed,” Pug smirked so his left eyebrow seemed pulled by an invisible string. “You know, I dress up real nice as a date.”



BY DARRYL JONES.

Chapter Twenty

SHADOWS FROM THE CHAIN-LINK FENCE, once diamonds, now stretched to strange parallelograms past the first base line at Mosswood Park.

The manicured chalk line that'd been set earlier by the vintage baseball league was scuffed and appropriated by the pickup softball squad, whose crushed PBR and Hamm's empties littered the field like stray mines from a long-forgotten war.

Pug and April—respectively in a sharp suit, red dress—walked to the fence like some out-of-place wedding party. The smell of BBQ wafted from the cove of trees to their right. On the top step of the bleachers, an old man in multiple jackets napped. His knee swayed in the breeze. Thuds from the basketball courts set a beat to the transistor radio blaring the A's postgame. They'd won, 7-2 over the Astros, Bartolo Colon's fifteenth of the year.

"Don't know how you're gonna play in that get-up, Pug," shouted Peter from inside the dugout through his thick beard. "But, you know, you do you."

"What's the score?" Pug grasped the chain-links and peered through. Bases were loaded. "If you need a grand slam, I got you."

"No doubt," Peter laughed.

“We’re down eight, two outs in the eighth,” Dusty squinted at the scorecard that’d been scrawled on the ragged inside of a torn PBR box, its brethren now role-playing as second and third base. “Got a good feeling, though, with Randy Softball coming up.”

“Open inning, baby,” Randy shouted from the batter’s box. The five-run-per-inning limit that lorded over innings one through seven—you know, to keep things nice and friendly—was no longer in play. “I’m done pulling my punches.”

“We should get going,” April lit a cigarette.

“This is a big moment,” Pug said.

Gabe winked and lofted two Modelos over the fence. April and Pug cradle-caught the cans, opened them at arm’s length so they spritzed clear of their society garb. They sipped and watched Cory on the mound, arching the green softball toward the plate. It began inside, then magically drifted to the plate’s outer edge.

“Strike!” shouted Mike behind the plate, backwards A’s hat indicating his catcher position.

“Really?” Randy’s bat slumped on his shoulder.

“Hit the corner,” Mike said. “One and two,” he held devil’s horns to the field.

Randy tapped his bat on the plate and re-loaded. The next pitch arched in, but this time, Randy Softball’s tongue momentarily flicked out with anticipation.

He lifted his front leg, set it down, and all at once his body twisted like a spring-loaded trap. His bat blurred, a sonic boom echoed, and from that synchronized chaos ejected a neon green streak into the waves of violet that layered the setting sky.

Peter, Dusty, Gabe, and the rest of the boys spilled out from the dugout for unobstructed views. The infielders twisted, wonderstruck, while the right and left fielders gave up. It was all up to Tommy, out there alone in deep center field.

He sprinted back, and the rush of wind knocked his cap to the patch of dirt where his nearly-full can of PBR rested. He spun around to track the ball, and backed up toward the rising base of the giant eucalyptus tree that’d invasively rooted however many years ago. He could back up no further, so he turned to face the tree itself, waiting for the carom. The ball smacked halfway up the pale trunk and trampolined back, and so Tommy shifted his weight and sprinted back toward the field to track

the ball's new trajectory. He dove with an outstretched glove, and, just before he face-planted into the grass, the ball landed in his mitt.

He held it skyward. Catches off the trees counted as a ground rule. Out.

"Holy shit!" Pug screamed.

All ten from both squads cheered. Tommy pushed himself up and jogged in, his PBR hanging from his grin. After congrats and a feigned crotch-smack from the exiting Randy, Tommy slapped five with Pug.

"Tommy, I need some help," Pug said. He went through that night's fundraiser at Fairyland and its general importance to the case at hand. "Need an extra pair of eyes. Can't trust that the bald fucker whose head I split won't be around. Would be nice to know if he is."

"What's the pay?"

"Round at Kaye's?"

Tommy lifted his hand to slap a binding five, then hesitated.

"Of...?"

"PBR?"

Tommy kept his arm aloft.

"Fuck, man, fine. Goose Island?" Pug offered.

Tommy nodded, grinned, slapped a deal.

"Bring those binoculars," Pug said.

The last inning came and went with nothing noteworthy, then came the dueling cheers, the high-fives, and de-cleating in the grass with a round of lighter dick-toss.

Then, they were off to Fairyland.

They pulled off Grand, the sun setting behind the high-rises west of the lake, and parked in front of the old lawn bowling club. April's heels clicked as they crossed the street, and Tommy headed to the nearby bandstand, casting its last shadows on those seeking a day's shelter. The plan, organized on the drive, was for Tommy to roam outside Fairyland and alert Pug, via earbud connect, if he saw the brute.

Pug and April melded into the suits and gowns, the jewels and critical glances, and funneled to a line aimed at the giant old woman's shoe. April checked in with her plus-one in exchange for neon green wristbands, and the two entered Children's Fairyland, the storybook park said to be Walt's inspiration

for Disneyland, longstanding on the northwest indentation of Oakland's beautifully misshapen lake.

A giant pumpkin sat next to a snack shop, a bathroom line curved through the false storefronts of the Wild West town. Dragons, windmills, and wishing wells filled space between treehouses, a lit stairwell led down the mouth of a whale, and fairy tale characters loomed at every turn, their contours ominous in the amber glow of the pathway lights.

"Shit's creepy, no?" Pug asked loudly.

"Don't make me regret the invite," April said.

Pug double-thumbed to his exaggerated frown face, and she rolled her eyes to look away.

Partygoers roamed, holding plastic martini glasses and whisks of glow-in-the-dark filaments. Kegs were tucked into elf houses, while intricately-designed hors d'oeuvres rode trays held by minimum wage help. Fat men in suits steered their young dates with thick hands pressed into their lower backs. Pug smelled pot in the air.

They walked under a banner proclaiming "Coletti's Crew: Tech Skills for Better Opportunities" and went to the end of the long cocktail line.

"How big is this Coletti guy anyway?" Pug asked.

"Well, so far," she scanned the horizon. "I've picked out the mayor, five city council members, chief of police, more than a handful of notables from Sacramento and the city. So, let's say, he's quote unquote bigger than you or I."

April's eyes met a legal associate's, so she left Pug in the line for drinks. A bulbous man, whose heft spilled from his blazer like a fanny pack, swayed ahead of him. His eyes had the concussive glaze of three too many drinks, and he shifted in his loafers like he didn't know you never buy beer, you rent it.

"What's this shindig about anyway," Pug nudged the fat man. "I'm on a date, a bit out of my element."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," the man exhaled. "Can't keep track of 'em. Coletti's got a bunch. Only important thing is if you're invited, you show. Make your donation, kiss that ring." He laughed out a sprinkle of phlegm. "But it's not all bad. We get to write these off." He hoisted his cup of purple liquid, dropped a few bucks into the tin, and staggered off.

Pug bought the drinks and sat amongst the lawn gawkers

who watched a juggler in a top hat twirl bowling pins. He downed his drink, then April's, and rocked to his feet to stroll around the park. He'd forgotten about his earbud until a digital chime snapped him back into the plan.

"Nothing yet," read Tommy's text.

He lurched to a stone bench in front of a small theater. Over its rear wall, he heard strums from an acoustic guitar, the throaty tones of a lounge singer. He closed his eyes, he wasn't sure for how long.

A booming voice interrupted the nap. It came from a tall man with a curved Roman nose who leaned casually against the theater stage. He wore a tailored suit the color of charcoal, and that same hue hung on the sideburns bracketing his slick-backed brunette hair. He campaigned to his growing half-circle of revelers.

"Here's the trick," the man said, who Pug soon recognized as Coletti. "You don't do the work yourself, you don't even go through the city. The neighborhood groups do it for you, through their own sheer, self-churned obstruction."

The man breathed in the baffled looks around him, grinned, continued.

"See, the key thing you learn when you work in the business of housing is that people, well, they really, really, really hate other people. That goes extra for hippies."

They waited for the punchline, realized that was it, and collapsed into laughter.

Pug shifted to stand, but a powerful grip on his shoulder set him back down.

He felt the sharp point of a gun buried deep into his back.



BY TIFFANY SILVER BRAUN.

Chapter Twenty-One

PUG FELT A TUG INSIDE HIS EAR, then a hot pop as his white earbud was yanked out. It hung flaccidly over his shoulder.

“Shit!” he held a hand to his ear and turned to confront the bully, then froze when the gun nestled in his back cocked.

“Always happen to be where I least expect,” Hamilton grinned.

“Seems more your problem than mine, pal,” Pug said.

He twisted slightly and from the corner of his eye he saw an errant wisp of black hair loosen. Hamilton licked two fingers and guided the strands back to order.

“I’m a donor,” Pug bullshitted. “I care deeply about, you know, the... helping of the... I want to say, robot kids?”

Hamilton smiled.

“I enjoy your wit, but it’s not for everyone,” Hamilton said. “Tough critic over there.” He nodded to the sycophants hovering around Coletti, who now departed and shunted aside to reveal the brute Spike. The white bandage still hung over the swollen bulb of flesh above his left eye.

He held eye contact with Pug.

“Can’t make ‘em all laugh all the time, I guess,” Hamilton said.

He grabbed Pug's arm and, with gun as prod, they twirled in a synchronized waltz through a rushing stream of guests who'd gotten word that the night's speeches were about to begin. Spike staggered through and grasped Pug's other arm, casually but with purpose, like he was retrieving a loose plastic bag the wind had momentarily caught. Pug heard Spike's growl in his ear.

Looking like paper doll cutouts, the three headed into the dark empty contours of Fairyland. Through the night's thick fog came a double-tap test from a PA system.

"Ladies and gents, ladies and gents, hello everyone!" a high-pitched voice said, somewhere across the park. "Y'all got all that free booze, snacks, the prizes and raffles for dinner at, I was told, that new taco joint in town, maybe you've heard of it, Taco Bell?"

Pug heard the droning bass from the crowd's laughter.

"But, for real, this is where you pay us back for all that free booze, by swaying, blinking out your double vision, and listening to a few speeches."

Another bassy laugh.

"This way," Hamilton whispered, and Pug was carried off his feet into a maze inspired by Alice in Wonderland. The stucco tunnels blocked the crowd noise. Hamilton's sharp steps sounded like cracked knuckles. They threw him against a wall.

"I've got better jokes than that hack," Pug said.

"Shut the fuck up," Spike spoke.

"There's a chance you're not taking this as seriously as we'd hoped," Hamilton said.

"It's not your fault," he gestured at the tunnel. "Not the most menacing of locales."

"To be honest, I don't think you're wrong," Hamilton said. "Nevertheless."

Hamilton nodded to Spike who, in a single motion, pulled an iron pipe from his jacket. It glinted in the purple of the attraction lights on its arc toward Pug's forearm. Pug felt a hot white flash and screamed into the open air until his mouth was muffled by Hamilton's gloved hand.

Pug blinked Spike's bald head into focus, smelled the grease on Hamilton's gloves, slammed shut his eyes and hesitantly fingered the break in his radial bone.

"I suppose the two of you are even now," Hamilton said. "And if you're now appropriately primed into the proper feelings of

dread and hopelessness, let's get to why we dragged you here. Where the fuck's Sam?"

Pug cradled his left arm like a hunk of store-bought meat and met Hamilton's eyes.

"Check the Coliseum yet?" he smirked. "Sam's a big A's dude. Maybe try the triple deck."

A chilled gust of lake breeze funneled through the halls. It flicked at Hamilton and that damn wisp of hair had freed itself again.

"Seem to be at an impasse," Hamilton said. "Usually wouldn't be a problem. We'd break your legs, leave you to be found and recuperate, either at Highland or Kaiser, depending on your coverage, and find the information elsewhere. It's out there, floating somewhere in town, won't be difficult to get at. Thing about the company your buddy keeps is that information's easily bought."

He licked his fingers, pulled his hair taut, but it wouldn't take. Not until Hamilton set his gun down on a ledge and used both of his lick-spat hands to force it into its proper place.

"And if we didn't, we'd come back and try you again," Hamilton said, indicating for Spike to lift and walk him. "Problem this time is our boss. He wants us to see this to the end. Don't ask, I don't know why. You know how bosses work," Hamilton shrugged. "Next hour of your life's gonna feel like it won't end. But believe me when I say that it most definitely will."

Hamilton shoved his leather-gloved fist back into Pug's mouth, and Spike pinned Pug's healthy arm behind his back. He shouldered into a flurry of resistance as Spike pulled, and a sharp ripple of pain flowed from Pug's mouth into Hamilton's glove.

Spike lifted the iron pipe above his head, Pug's throat closed in anticipation, then he heard a gun cock.

"Knock it the fuck off."

April.

There she was, looking like a corporate sophisticate staggering in after last call, rumpled red dress, high heels set gently on the ground next to her, feet bare and specked with dirt from the park's cement ground. The difference between her and the weekend liver warriors was the gun she held, Hamilton's it looked like.

And it was pointed at Spike's head.



BY TIFFANY SILVER BRAUN.

Hamilton released his grasp, rested against the wall. Pug shuffled to his feet and set his good arm on April's shoulder.

"Think I'm hurt," he huffed.

"No shit," she said.

Laughter from the distant crowd barreled in through the maze. It subsided and Pug heard only his pulse, then some distant tinny sound like a mosquito buzzing an ear.

"What's that noise?" April asked.

She heard it, too. Pug traced the buzzing to his earbud, still draped over his shoulder. He popped it back in, and Tommy's hollering clarified.

"Pug! Pug! Pug!"

"Tommy?" Pug eyed Spike, who glared with a glazed focus. "Don't you tell me you think you see that bald asshole. I already found him."

"Shit, thought you were gone," Tommy said. "Nah, nah, haven't seen him. I don't think he's showing."

"If you assholes are ever looking for an ace scout," Pug muttered to Hamilton and Spike, offering up Tommy's services.

"But get this," Tommy went on, "I'm on the edge of Lake Merritt, looking across that sliver. I saw some shadows in the balcony of the apartment building, maybe fourth floor. I looked, and it's a dude angling a rifle this way. Well, more... your way now. And, well, I wouldn't say he don't look like that friend of yours Sam."

"Shit," Pug mimed a sign to April to keep an eye on the bastards and he limped toward the laughter.

He approached the rear of the crowd—tuxes draped over shoulders, white button-ups untucked, hands full of cocktail shrimps and beer in commemorative pint glasses. He angled into the next layer: ankle-length dresses and black ties crisply set.

He pressed on.

Three sets of auburn lights splashed over the stage. The speaker's white teeth sprayed a sharp glint across the crowd and into Pug's eyes.

"They tell you to give to the charity for the taxes, right?" Coletti smirked into the mic. "But they don't tell you about the actual lives you change. Come on up, son."

Coletti offered an inviting hand offstage, and up walked a

tall Black man with a trim haircut and thick-framed glasses.

“Everyone, meet Trey,” Coletti said.

Applause swelled into an ovation, and the furious action of elbows slowed Pug’s progress.

“What do I do here?” Pug asked Tommy. “Just, like, shout?”

“Someone’s got a damn gun!” Tommy said. “Tell ‘em to get their asses down!”

“Trey here. My boy, Trey,” Coletti grasped the man’s neck, shook it with loving affection. “Trey is one of the first kids through the Foundation.”

“He graduated, spent five years at some of the top tech companies across the Bay. Had it made, it seemed. Then he called me last month, and I heard that quiver in his voice. You know it. That wavering of someone not sure what’s next. You know, before reaching the understanding that none of us are ever quite sure.”

A ripple of laughter.

“So, I made him our first Foundation-trained team leader.”

Coletti primed the applause with his own claps.

“And next week, he starts running his own house!” Coletti held Trey’s arm upward like a winning prize-fighter.

“Gonna find someone in security,” Pug cupped his hand around the bud’s mic.

“Tell those rich dickwads to get the fuck down!” Tommy screamed. “Dude’s taking aim!”

“Take cover,” Pug mumbled, in what would barely count as words spoken out loud. “Take cover, take cover,” he hesitantly urged. “Gun, guys. I see a gun.”

His whisper cascaded into a murmur. “Gun,” Pug exhaled, and those nearby edged away, leaving him on an island of isolation, as if he’d just let one rip.

“Shout it!” Tommy screamed.

The crowd’s focus, by now, had been drawn from Coletti enough he paused his speech to squint through the lights in an attempt to see what was going on.

The slower-on-the-uptake members of the audience followed Coletti’s squint, and they too centered their focus on Pug. Trey backed into the dark with a worried look on his face.

Pug inhaled deeply, held his hands forward in a pose of transparency, and shouted.

“Someone’s got a gun!”

“Is there anything I need to kn—” the microphone picked up Coletti’s last words before the gunshot rang out, first in Pug’s earbud, then in the foggy night.

Coletti fell backwards off the stage as if shoved by the splatter of red that’d materialized on his chest.

Part IV

Right to Quiet & Peaceful Enjoyment



BY TRAVIS TARR.

Chapter Twenty-Two

WHAT ALL THOSE OLD MOVIES CLAIM, with their cramped interrogation rooms, their lone swinging spotlight over an empty tabletop, perps glistening like bacon—well, those are mostly lies. That’s not how it looks in the factual world.

The rooms are sort of rectangular, sure, but the light fixtures are high up in the ceiling behind panes of industrial plastic, and they cast everything below in an alabaster glow. And the lone table inside isn’t placed in the middle, but rather smashed up against a side wall that was once a pristine white, but now an impressive display of jagged hieroglyphics and initials, left behind by suspects who came and left long before Pug.

Pug lazily drooled out the side of his mouth as he examined this graffiti, his eyes glazed from the pain meds.

“Have to excuse me, brain’s not so hot now,” Pug said, tracing a finger over the bumps in his forearm where the surgeon had placed the metal screws. “But with that in mind, what can I do for you, sir?”

A noxious man with a chin like mold who’d previously introduced himself as Lieutenant Grately sat in the room’s corner. He dipped a tea bag into his steaming mug with the constant rhythm of an oil derrick, squinted with a grimace, and chewed

nothing at all.

“Just a few blanks to fill in,” Grately said. His wispy mustache curled down the sides of his lips like hairy parentheses. “Lot of witnesses said you made a commotion right before Coletti was hit. Kept saying someone had a gun.”

“And I’ve said, more than a few times now, can’t remember much about that,” Pug said, hoisting forth his bandaged arm. “On account of the accident.”

“You got jumped, you said.”

“Hell of a night,” Pug nodded.

“Y’know, I walked the site again the other day, with those claims in mind,” Grately spoke to his mug. “Pretty good distance from that building to the stage. If the huge amount of witnesses were right, and you actually were shouting ‘gun,’ you must have hella good eyesight.”

“I got quality genetics, for sure,” Pug said. “But again, memory’s bad right now.”

“Hopefully it’ll clear soon,” Grately’s eyes followed the steam to Pug’s face. “Hopefully in time to keep distance from what’s now a murder charge.”

Grately’s attention returned again to the rhythm of his tea-bag dip. They hadn’t mentioned that Coletti was dead, not until then. Pug felt a blast of hot rush up his neck then into his face.

The door burst open and in strutted assistant-with-the-cock-sure-s swagger-D.A. Kyle Labriola, all seven feet of him somehow poured into a charcoal suit. A smirk of glib certainty was present in his nod to Pug, then he hoisted his burnt-brown briefcase and dropped it on the table with a room-trembling thud.

“This was fun, bullshitting around, all that jokey shit. It’s good to have fun. Where would we be without it,” Labriola said. “But we have more than enough to keep you here indefinitely, and we sure as hell’ll use it until you start speaking some god-damn sense.”

“I don’t know anything,” a throb rippled through Pug’s arm, and he instinctively reached for more meds in his pocket before the rattling reminder that he was handcuffed to the wall. “Why don’t you find the fuckers who did this instead of wasting time with me?”

Labriola sat down silently and Pug rested back. The metal-bottomed chair legs scraped the linoleum. Then there was

quiet except the sounds of breathing and the gargling from Grately, still dipping that damn teabag, the bubbles keeping time with the pounding pulse in Pug's ears.

"Where's Sam?" Grately said.

On cue, Labriola cracked his briefcase and fanned a dozen photos across the table. Many were lacking in quality and exposure, but that was Sam alright, no doubt about it, carrying a rifle-shaped case through the surveilled streets of downtown Oakland, then into the building where the gun, the one that tested positive for the round in Coletti, was found.

"Let me, again, apologize for my awkwardness and such this evening, but I'm hopped up on more goofballs than you'd think," Pug said, "so pardon me if this came up already, but, can I do one of those 'plead the fifth' things here, or...?"

Labriola slammed a fist against the table and the photos hovered for a moment and landed at odd angles so that Sam's face was jumbled like a jigsaw. The blast of noise echoed and faded like factory-crumpled tin.

"No time for bullshit, Milo," Labriola said evenly. "Give us Sam."

Midway through a shrug, Pug thought it wise to at least feign some half-look of sincerity, so he added some innocently raised eyebrows to his look.

The door opened again, and in stepped April, still in her high heels and red dress. She pointed to Pug.

"Don't you say one more fucking word," she reset her point to Labriola and then Grately. "Not you two fucks either, not until I get my damn seat and get my bearings here."

She stumble-wobbled to the seat, slumped, peeled off her shoes.

"So, why are we here today anyway, questioning my client like this?" she demanded. "There are dozens and dozens of witnesses, and not a one said he pulled a trigger."

"He screamed 'gun' right before the shot," Grately rasped. "I got a stack of witnesses dick high."

"Yours or his?" April said, nodding to Labriola. "Makes a difference. Anyway, false group memory induced by the trauma of seeing such a ghastly event." She turned to Pug. "They ask you what you said?"

Pug shook his head.

She turned back to his inquisitors.

“Maybe he said ‘fun,’” she said. “Seems like a normal thing to say at a children’s park. Fun.”

“Did you say ‘fun?’” Labriola asked.

“Seems likely now that you mention it,” Pug shrugged.

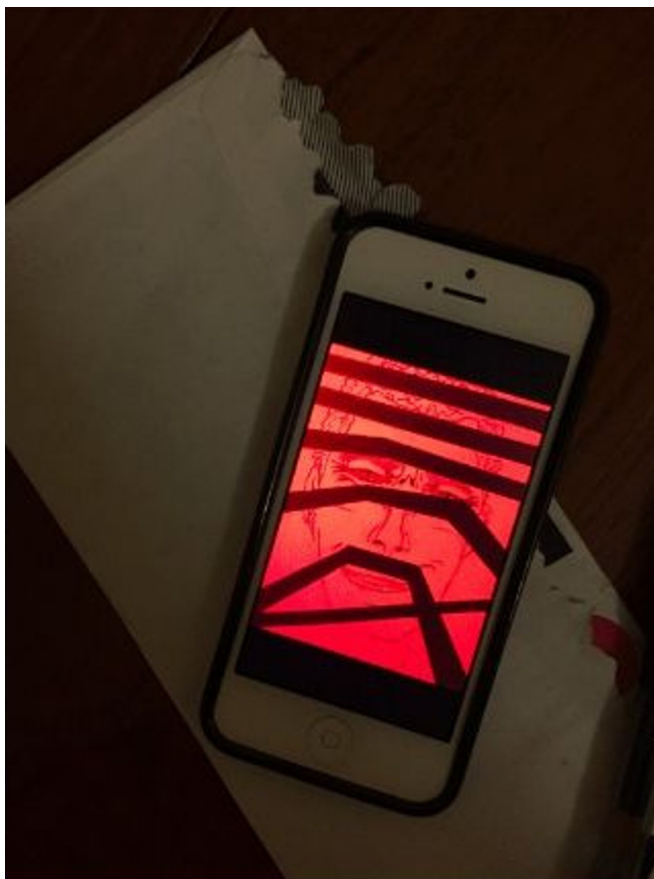
Labriola turned to April with a wincing smirk. April grabbed her heels in her fist, stood with a stretching groan.

“Great, we’re done then,” she nodded to Pug, who, with the cautious giddiness of a cat burglar on his way out of a score, tip-toed through the door. April followed.

Halfway down the long reflective hallway, Pug heard echoing footsteps coming up from behind him and instinctively stepped ahead of April, so that she’d be in front of the presumed OPD onslaught on the way. That’s how it looked to all involved, anyway. He’d later blame the cowardice on the meds, then just made up some bullshit about wanting to get out of there. She’d mock him relentlessly for it for years.

Anyway, when he peaked past April’s shoulder, it wasn’t the full OPD squad at all, but only Frank.

“Pug, if you’re going after your friend, which I can’t stop you from doing, you be careful. But more than that, be quick,” Frank said. “If we get to him, we’ll arrest him. If the other ones do, whoever else is mixed up in this, we may not even find his body.”



BY MARGO SNYDER.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THE PALE FROM HIS LAPTOP merged with the glow from his phone, and his cigarette's quivering amber gave Pug's face a flicker of life.

He thumbed through his contacts and squinted for a moment at the entry for LIZGHEYBAR before concluding that they were drunken hieroglyphics: Lizzy, bartender at Commonwealth. Two rings, then to voicemail, then a return text aghast at the prospect of an actual phone call.

His broken arm still bound by a weighty cast, since filled with signatures and scrawls from the folks at the bars, he struggled out a text back: "Seen Sam?" She hadn't.

"Not at any of my places in the city either," Harriet said. She thumbed off her phone and set it face-down on a sealed envelope Pug had found slid under his door. "But my places aren't really mine anymore anyway, so."

She shrugged. Pug shrugged back. Harriet shrugged again and added a smirk, which Pug mimicked, but now with a smile and focus of his eyes. He waited a moment and set his laptop on the table. It rocked and steadied to a balance on top of her phone, and their faces were pitched into relative darkness.

A burnt orange floodlight from outside, tripped by a raccoon

or some other night scavenger, flashed across Pug's face. It shot through his window's bent plastic blinds, miraculously splashing a Fu Manchu of light onto his face. Harriet laughed and couldn't stop.

"What?" Pug asked.

Harriet held a raised finger and shook her head with enough composure to whisper out "don't move." She retrieved her phone, snapped a photo, examined the shot, and coughed a laugh that rattled Pug's collection of branded mugs in his cabinet, all giveaways from friends who'd departing to other cities.

"What is it?" and Pug shifted his weight closer.

"Nothingnothingnothing!"

She waved her phone in her hands like a Polaroid that'd develop if shaken with enough gusto. Pug reached, and their knuckles struck at such a specific point of vulnerability that both of them screamed and reeled away in pain.

"Motherfucker!" Harriet screamed.

"Goddamnit," Pug winced, lips puckered against his clenched hand, tears forming.

The two stared at their hands, their pain throbs steady into an a cappella chorus of rhythmic breathing. Harriet smiled, but before Pug could smirk, his apartment door burst open.

"Fucking nothing," Mercia shouted from the end of the apartment's thin entry hall as Tommy slammed the door shut behind them. "Can't find his dumb ass," and stretched out in the couch space between Harriet and Pug.

"Even called that guy you know," Tommy lifted an eyebrow toward Pug and subtly aimed a mimed gun, his thumb the firing pin.

"Oh, no shit?" Pug said.

Tommy shook his head. With that pantomime, he meant that punk Greco on 14th, him of the two strikes worth of gun charges yet still gutsy or desperate enough to keep running them around even with only that one strike left. Knew him through friends of friends, the kind of guy you'd somehow find if you needed a piece, who knew how to get whatever you needed.

"Well, hell, I'd already put word out to my crew," Harriet said. "Got nothing, sorry buds."

"Fuck this kid," Mercia shook out with a mix of frustration and anxiety. Her hands trembled as she reached forward and

steadied on the table, then gripped the sealed envelope that happened to lay there, and stress-creaked it into a ball.

She closed her eyes and breathed in through her nose, and Pug had another one of those memories of her, of them, flash through his mind. This time it was the front seat of some car, in the streetlight amber under the overpass where they'd had a few of those end-of-date conversations that don't seem to close until dawn.

She opened her eyes into the pale of today, relaxed her hand, and the envelope reflexed to its normal form.

"This important?" Mercia smiled, and handed it over.

"I don't even know," Pug grabbed it, stuck a thumb under the paper lip and began tearing. "Nothing important comes through the mail anymore, right?"

Inside was a tri-folded sheet of paper with some corporate logo he'd seen but wasn't sure where. His eyes drifted down as he opened it.

"Nothing but bullshit, anyway," Tommy stretched his legs on the red throw carpet that Pug had found years back on the side of the road. He'd traded an airport ride to a bud to help him drag it up the building's staircase.

"Shit," Pug said as he looked at the letter. "Shit," he resigned.

It was a form letter from the housing corporation GEN, the only unique parts of it announcing its intention for one MILO SINCLAIR ARNOLD and two typed lines with how much his rent would increase and when.

"Son of a bitch," and Pug reflexively scratched the outside of his cast even though the itch itself was hidden well beneath.

"What is it?" Harriet said.

Pug turned to her and the outside floodlight flicked on again, and the light through the blinds highlighted the edge of his wall bookshelf. His eyes followed the light, and he squinted and saw the corner of a notebook that rested on top, its edge crumpled and bent inward.

It was the notebook he'd taken from Sam's blue tarp shelter at Camp Here/There. He'd forgotten all about its maps and X's and whatever else.

"Shit!" Pug screamed, excitedly, face rising from a pale sheen to one glowing with promise. "Son of a bitch!"



BY RYAN THE TRUCK.

Chapter Twenty-Four

WHITE PAINT ON THE IRON MESH guarding the splintered remains of the front door flecked off and caught the purple of the Fruitvale dusk as they floated to the ground. Pug waited for the vibration from his knock to settle, pounded again, and the metal hummed into silence. There was no sound or movement inside the house.

“Another empty?” Mercia called from outside the property line’s rusted fence. “Think Sam was using this as a crash pad?”

“Mystery to me,” Pug mumbled, and squinted one last peek inside. He saw a rod of golden light slicing through the space like a mystical trail to some great treasure. It came from a hole in the cracked board that covered a former window.

“Two left,” he held up Sam’s notebook on his way back to her car.

They hopped on the freeway and headed west to Temescal. It was the next stop on the hand-drawn map that Sam had sketched together.

The map was crude, but it was Oakland. There was the lake, there was the bullseye of the highways, there was the awkward outline of the bay’s edge. Seemingly random asterisks were marked throughout, each with an address next to it, and the

numbers 1 through 5, which correlated to a separate list of dates. But the linkage between those two had yet to become clear.

“Look,” Tommy had tapped his finger once-twice on the map when they were all spit-balling ideas at Pug’s. “It’s obviously a pentagram, my dudes.”

Everyone else silently gave the misreading a round of nods out of politeness, then carried on as if nothing was said.

Once the hour came for Tommy to leave for his shift working the Salt Lick door, and then for Harriet to start her twice-a-month overnight gig unloading boxes behind GrossOut, Pug and Mercia took off. He rode shotgun in her car as they got a real-life look at the points on the map.

So far, it’d taken them to a two-story in Ghost Town, some rotten old party house on Pill Hill where couches in the yard languished moldy and torn, and the Fruitvale place they’d just left. Each house had been vacant, seemingly for a long while, as suggested by the telltale signs of padlocked gates, weeds rising above the fences, windows cracked by kids with rocks or neighbors taking pot shots for no good reason. There wasn’t a pattern on the names left on the mailboxes, no traces of squatters, no yard signs describing plans for the property, either from the past or yet unfulfilled.

The dates that somehow connected to those map points and addresses meant nothing to Pug and Mercia, other than that they were from earlier in this year and aligned with the span during which Sam had gotten into whatever it was he’d gotten into. Mercia tried cross-referencing the dates and addresses with the Chronicle, the Express, the East Bay Times, and the dwindling others online, but nil so far.

“Maybe they were flop houses,” Mercia said behind her steering wheel, “places for Sam to shoot up.” Pug forced out a false click of his tongue at the suggestion to give her some hope against this theory.

Mercia took the MacArthur exit and followed the thoroughfare’s wind on between Kaiser’s new digs, still under construction. She hung a right at the Carl’s Jr. and entered the burgeoning row of Temescal restaurants. They glided onto Shattuck at the odd triangle with the long-vacant hot dog shack, where stapled sheets hung on its ancient exterior asking the new community what they’d want next in this old space. As they approached, the

paper was ripped off by the car's wake, or a gust of wind, maybe some force like myself, and they floated off down Telegraph Ave.

Mercia followed the map and pulled into a short street that dead-ended into the highway wall. She ignored signs that claimed street space for the arrival of some work truck later that night and parked.

"Let's get a drink after this," Mercia said.

"Without a doubt," Pug said. "Work hard, drink harder, Merch."

She smiled, and the dimple in her left cheek made a rare appearance.

"No doubt, Pug," she said back.

The curls from her afro were backlit from the amber of nearby construction lights so that each strand's point was illuminated like a fiber optic. Pug smiled back, and then a strange flicker of black disturbed the halo surrounding Mercia's head. Pug blinked and realized that it was the shadow of a human shape moving inside the house they were there to inspect.

Someone was inside.

"Holy shit," Pug whispered before hopping out and high-knee running to the door. He took a calming breath and knocked.

A young white couple answered: he with Buddy Holly glasses and a light coating of stubble, her with a pink strip in her blond bob and a purple shirt from a coding conference.

"This is gonna sound weird," Pug began, and muscled through a barrage of dismissive "sorry, can't help you's" with the guarantee they weren't there for money, or to sell magazine subscriptions, or to get signatures for some corporate-funded prop headed to the state ballot. Seeing an opening, Pug bullet-pointed a version of the events that led him and Mercia to knock on their door that night.

"Sorry, man," said subtly rebellious Buddy Holly. "We moved in last month, so whatever happened on that date you got there," he pointed to Sam's notebook, "was before we got here."

"Maybe something was left behind?" Pug asked. "Notice anything when you moved in?"

"From what we heard from our landlord, the last tenants left this place real bad," he said. "They had to basically gut the whole interior. When we came for the viewing, everything was crisp and clean enough for us to pay cash on the spot."

“Wish we could help,” said the coder as she reached for the door. “We’ll keep an eye out.” She pushed it shut.

“Nice couple,” Mercia said, the next part louder than the first, “so sorry we had to inconvenience their colonizing assholes for a fucking minute.”

Pug put an arm around her shoulder and walked her back to the car.

“One more left,” he said. “Then that drink.”

They drove past the salvage depot and that breakfast joint, took a right at the chicken sandwich spot, and headed east on 51st. They took a left on Piedmont, past the new tiki joint and the red-and-white exterior of the cop motorcycle club, then to Sam’s final asterisk and address.

“Guess it’s that,” Mercia nodded to the exterior of the Chapel of the Chimes, an intricate columbarium outside the Mountain View cemetery that housed souls in a more space-conscious way. Mercia parked across the street, and they crossed back under the final purple trails of that day’s setting sky.

“Anyone living here ain’t gonna be much for conversation,” Pug said, but Mercia had already snatched a thin stick from the ground and worked it between the frame and locked door.

“Keep an eye out,” she said, and a moment later the latch snapped loose.

They crept inside.

Incense struck Pug’s nose, and the sun’s last light was still strong enough to penetrate the window panes and lay black bar shadows onto the floor tiles.

“What are we doing here anyway?” he asked.

“Beats me,” she answered, “but might as well go and find gramps,” as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Mercia thumbed on her cell’s flashlight, and began to lead them through a maze of bookshelves and flower arrangements, past the lingering memorial boxes showing mementos from lives lived: a football, a photo, an action figure, all kept safely behind plexiglass. They walked up a flight of stairs, took a right into darkness, and Pug heard faint drops from a trickling fountain ahead.

He recalled the story of Mercia and Sam’s great-grandpa, the first of their clan to settle in Oakland, their own origin story in a way.

His name was Edward, and he'd come from Chicago into the newly-christened Oakland Central Station because it was the furthest west the rails would take him. Whatever he was escaping from has been lost to time.

He'd hung around with a box of tools until he found work, slept under the stars until he'd raised enough money for a roof. He prided himself on the fact that his daughter was born inside a house. That daughter taught school for the Black Panthers, and that daughter's son had Mercia in '81 with Sam soon to follow. Their dad often took Sam and Mercia to this sacred space, where their roots lay as ash.

Pug turned the corner, and Mercia's flashlight caught an envelope casually hanging between the spaces reserved for Great-Grandpa Edward and the stranger he ended up settling next to.

"Predictable as shit," Mercia said.

She snatched it, tore it open, and of course it was from Sam.

"Been wonderin' when you'd show," read the letter's first words.



BY SANDEEP LEHIL.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE STATIC HISS of an old antenna TV filled the staggering silence in the columbarium. Pug scanned its hallways, and tracked the noise to a miniature memorial: a sloping rocky cascade with a trickling stream carving a path then funneling into a gutter, and winding back to the top where it began its cycle anew. It sat atop a plastic folding chair and faced a marble marker that'd been set there for a woman named Costa Woods.

"Looks like we have a date," Mercia handed Sam's letter over. Pug mouthed a "motherfucker" before reading its first line:

*M & P,
hopefully,
probably,*

*Not gonna spend time with specifics,
it's a public space, and who knows
who's gonna pick this up. If it's y'all,
head to where ya had your first
kiss, way back whenever the hell that was.*

- S

"A goddamn scavenger hunt," Mercia said.

Pug flicked the letter with his finger and eyed Mercia's black-and-white Chucks.

"Hope you can still hop fences in those," he said.

On their way out through the chapel's echoing labyrinthine halls, Pug explained his hunch.

He, at one time in the past, might well've mentioned something to Sam about a first kiss with his sis at that Black Dahlia grave, out where they used to sip Jameson and sputter and choke and laugh on those safe high school nights.

"Best guess, anyway."

Pug opened the door for Mercia and rewound his memory of that kiss, fuzzed by the wear-and-tear on that stretch of tape. He glanced at her smile in the candlelight flicker as they exited into the street.

Pug led them to a row of houses outside of Mountain View Cemetery, eyed the darkest backyard, and hopped the fence, hoping that a dog wasn't lying in wait for a serving of his feet. With the coast canine- and motion light-free, he whisper-urged Mercia to follow. They tiptoed to the wooden fence that bordered the cemetery proper, and he linked his fingers into a fleshy step that Mercia used as a vault. Pug hefted himself over behind her, and they paused in an open-air U-shaped mausoleum for a catch of the breath and scan for security. All clear.

They crept through the cemetery's tree-spattered main straightaway, and Mercia suddenly grabbed Pug's jean jacket and plastered him against a tree. He licked his lips in anticipation, but she was looking far past his mouth. She'd spotted the headlights of a patrolling car ahead, its driver on a mid-shift smoke break idling on the lookout between the gaudy memorials of Millionaire's Row. He got the message, and she let go of her grasp.

They hustled through roundabouts, ducked behind fountains, and staggered over the uneven footing of flat headstones sunk down so far that the grass now obscured names, dates, whatever else. Pug knew the way by heart, but if he had forgotten, the spread of devotional flowers and battery-operated votives ever-left by teenage goths always gave it away.

"Daughter," read the marker, "Elizabeth Short."

"Sam," Pug whispered into the nearby copse of oaks, the

obvious spot for anyone playing it safe. Only rustling leaves answered.

“Thought it’d be that easy?” Mercia asked incredulously, already opening another envelope that she’d found on the grave addressed to “M/P.” She read it:

*Okay, hot shits,
where'd you dumbasses propose
to one another?*

- S

Pug bit his tongue hoping it’d be time enough for the memory to bubble into Mercia’s recall. A gust whispered through the gravestones and coalesced in the branches, and then gathered the two old lovers in its whirlwind. It died down, and Mercia still hadn’t solved the riddle.

“On to Jack London,” Pug said.

“Of course!” But an unsteady squint betrayed her. “That’s obviously where one of us proposed to the other one of us.”

“At Merchant’s, Merch,” Pug said. “It was a big deal.”

Mercia back in the driver’s seat, Pug pouting as passenger, KALX playing something with a funky beat. Up Piedmont to Telegraph to Broadway, through a lucky run of green traffic lights.

Pug narrated his 21st birthday. It was before puking and getting thrown out by the bouncer, who’d finally noticed the Sharpie tally marks on Pug’s biceps, indicated his beer (|||||) and shot (|||||||) intake throughout the celebration. But it was more around beer four and shot three, while Mercia and Pug were huddled in the bar’s back oval booth that’d been idiotically bisected by a stripper pole, that they’d decided to get married. The proposal lingered for about a month with an occasional conversation about logistics, before it just kind of trailed off rather than ever officially being dismissed.

“Excuse me!” Pug now shouted at the drunken slouchers in that same booth, steadying himself by grasping that same, slick, stupid pole.

Merchant’s had cleaned up since his proposal, the creepy bikers and degenerates of “way back when” replaced by freshly-shaven weekend drinkers who crammed in after sunset.

“Think I left my keys here!” he shouted.

The booth mobilized to search beneath and between the plastic cushions, and a bro in a popped collar returned with a crumpled envelope. Mercia snatched it and they read it outside amongst the smokers.

She handed it over. It told them to visit the site of their official break up.

Twenty minutes later, Mercia diagonaled off Lake Merritt Boulevard and paralleled between two cars idling for orders outside the Tacos Mi Rancho truck. They ignored the chaotic assembly of those ordering and waiting, and walk-jogged across the street, where a neon sign advertised the housebound psychic that was a doorbell away from telling your future. This was where Mercia had told Pug she was leaving for L.A., that she wasn't sure when she'd be back.

She found it tucked behind the iron bars protecting the building's first-floor windows from break-ins.

“Spooky memories,” Mercia said, and tore open the envelope. “I had regrets and what-could've-beens too, you know.”

“Neither of us don't have a few scars,” Pug shook out two cigarettes, lit them both, handed one over. “What's he got for us.”

Sam told them to go have “a cheap date on me.”

“I got this one,” Pug said.

They got in the car and he directed her to the ancient Grand Lake moviehouse.

The pale white of the rooftop sign glowed through the Lake Merritt fog. Mercia parked on Grand, and the two infiltrated a line of gutter punks and plaid normies waiting for opening night of Machete Kills. Pug took her hand and led Mercia into the alley.

A fan of light spread from the building's cracked emergency door, propped open with a matchbox car. It was what Pug had used to sneak his friends in, give 'em a cheap date on him, back when he still had the projectionist gig in high school, a legacy position he'd handed down to Sam when his own time was up.

They crept inside, sidled up the carpeted hallway past the concessions stand and up the grand staircase to the upper theater, the palace's original balcony before the multiplex trend forced the mutilation.

They entered the red swinging doors as an usher with a

broom and custodial bin-on-a-stick walked out.

“Left my phone in there,” Pug said, as if the worker gave a shit.

“Slow down,” Mercia said, “where are you going?”

But Pug was already up the aisle past the empty rows, outside his old projectionist’s booth where another matchbox car was perched on the windowsill. He cupped his hands against the glass to shield his eyes from the lights, and scanned inside.

Another matchbox car balanced on the ladder that led up to the roof.

Pug led Mercia inside, and she began to climb, rung by rung. Halfway up, the booth’s back door popped open and the old projectionist, in his fedora hat as always, staggered in with a box of tapes under his arm.

Pug remembered him. Stephen was his name.

“Was wondering when you’d show,” he plainly croaked to Pug, and began setting up for the next show with the huffed grumble of a resigned lifer. “Off you go then.”

Pug followed Mercia up into the cloudy dark of the foggy night. When he fully ascended, he was blinded by the giant sign’s glow from the bulbs pointing out to potential customers.

His eyes adjusted and left a majestic halo that framed the huge letters, so that from their vantage the sign announced:

GRAND
LAKE
THEATRE

Mercia was halfway to the edge of the roof when Pug saw a shadow emerge from behind the giant letters.

It was Sam, and he smiled.

Mercia erased their distance in a heartbeat and obscured his grin in a hug.



BY TRAVIS TARR.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE OCEAN SWELL OF THE CARS floated nearby on the 580. They drowned out whatever murmurs of anxious love that the quivering Mercia spoke to Sam.

Sam opened his eyes and peered over her shoulder, grinning at Pug so wide that his teeth-whites caught the theater sign. Pug angled to avoid being blinded by the lights and stared at the rooftop's black slate to clear the phantom flare.

When he looked back up, Mercia was pounding her balled fists against Sam's chest.

"You motherfucker!" her scream pierced through the highway traffic hum, and Pug ran to the siblings. "What gives you the right! What gives you the fucking right!"

Sam's dangled arms vibrated with each strike until Pug pulled Mercia off. Her feet tangled within his and they collapsed to the ground.

"The fucking right!" she screamed at her brother's sinewy silhouette.

"Okay, okay," Pug tried. "Got to let him talk now, Merch."

The shouts devolved into spittle, and Pug let her babbles trickle into heaving breaths, which calmed and again gave way to that pervasive highway whoosh.

“What happened, Sam?” Pug asked and began to climb to his feet.

“Stay down, kids,” Sam cross-legged into a sit. He pitched back his sweatshirt hood, and his scalp’s faint stubble caught the theater sign lights. It all gave his skull a fuzzy halo.

“Hell of a story,” he said.

Sam told briefly again of losing his cafe gig when that new owner took over, and the subsequent wearing out of friends’ couches, until pride and desperation took him to a borrowed tent, then a downtown encampment under the 880. A few nights there, and that limp-in-a-suit came around for workers, offering the gig with a pathway back indoors.

“Shit gets cold, it gets real cold out there,” Sam muttered in a rocking motion. “Shit gets hella cold,” again and again.

Mercia knelt beside Sam and rubbed his shoulder.

“You don’t need to worry about that now, babe,” she said, and Sam nestled his head into her shoulder and told again of Hamilton The Suit’s lure of the warm room.

When word got to Sam that Hamilton was looking only for users, a big catch for his long-clean self, he borrowed a pencil, pulled up a sleeve, and shaded to life some of his dormant track marks. In the hazy amber floods of the underpass it worked well enough, and Hamilton snapped fingers to his crew leaning nearby on the white van. They gathered Sam’s tent and everything within, hauled it away, and unloaded it into the top-floor room of that Victorian flop in West Oakland that Pug had later found himself in.

“The hell happened to you in there anyway?” Sam asked. “Heard some story about you being in there when they wrecked it?”

“Another time,” Pug twirled a wrap-it-up motion with the fingers on his non-casted arm, and Sam got back to his story.

His first night back indoors, Sam was met by the grin-bent mustache of the scrawny white dude named Dave. Then came niceties and get-to-know-yous over black coffee and spiced oats around the kitchen table.

There was rail-thin Reggie in his Raiders gear, and that stout old woman named Latch who could kick everyone’s ass. They shared quipped histories. Dave called upstairs to “Lucian” once, twice before bounding up. Originally from Chicago, he

announced the news with a Hawk Harrelson “he gone,” but no one got the reference. Dave finished up the instructions by saying Sam could hook up any electronics into the yellow extension cord, use away if you want, but do it behind closed doors. And don’t be late for sunrise wake-up, don’t be late, don’t ever be fucking late.

“Told me to get some rest,” Sam said on the theater roof, and paused through a deafening blast of wind that’d come off the shores of Lake Merritt before finishing his thought. “Told me it’d be my last peaceful night for awhile. He was right.”

The next morning, Sam continued his story, this new crew waited by the front door until the bass-heavy arrival of the van, and then all of them stepped out into the chilled morning haze. The day’s first sun painted the van a crinkled shade of orange. The door swung open, the crew filed in. Latch and Reggie spread in the rear, Sam and Dave crammed in the middle, stacks of files and loose papers on the front passenger seat.

“Where’s that other one?” Spike, yeah that one, called from the driver’s seat. Latch hocked a loogie into her fist, the only sound besides the tinny noise of the No Remorse cassette in the deck. “Need another one of you, then.”

They rolled back south on Market to Sam’s old encampment under the 880. Spike idled the van across the street and peered at the row of yawning early risers exiting their tents.

“Who you like, kid?” Spike called to Sam.

Through the window tint, Sam saw Eugene sprawling out of his tent. They’d made quick friends when Sam first set up there.

Eugene had recognized Sam from McClymonds High, said he was a few years older, said they’d hooped after school once or twice. Sam didn’t remember him at all, but pretended to. Eugene introduced him around camp and gave Sam word on who to trust and who to not. Over that first night’s campfire flicker, he watched Eugene start a tie-off before saying good-night and heading to his tent to finish off the nod.

Sam tapped a point to Eugene on the van glass.

“Him,” he said to Spike.

Spike grabbed the van’s keys on his way out and approached Eugene. Sam watched the sales pitch, and Eugene ducked back into his tent. He came back out moments later with his shoes.

“Damage is done now, but if you actually do like someone,”

Dave croaked as he hopped in to further cram the rear seat, “in the future, best to keep that mouth of yours shut.”

The van’s side door slid open, and Eugene smirked and dapped Sam, then slid in next to him. Spike revved up and eyed the pair through the rearview.

“You two brothers or something?” he said. “Don’t mean that in a racist way or something. I ain’t racist,” and then into a mutter, “whatever, don’t care, fuck off.”

The van drove up San Pablo past the tattered Greyhound station that looked like some long-neglected UFO in need of a paint job. Sam looked east, and the flickering shadows from the morning commuters on the highway above made the movements of the first-shift workers renovating that old Odd Fellows Hall look chopped, like characters in an old zeotrope.

Spike turned left and pulled up next to the towering self-storage building. The full crew exited the van, and only the veterans of the gig stretched.

Spike walked to an orange aluminum door and keyed open a padlock. He shoved up the door with a shuddering crash and revealed a locker of scattered, tipped boxes and other debris.

“Alright,” he said, and Latch and Reggie waded in and began unloading to the sidewalk. Eugene and Sam gawked for one rotation before Dave set ‘em right, then they began moving as well.

The cardboard boxes were labelless, their tape jobs rushed and haphazard. Bulky items like lamps and chairs and tables were full of scratches and dents, and collected some more upon their clumsy exit. Spike lit up a smoke as he oversaw the operation.

Latch gripped a loosely-patched box, and as she set it down, it split at the bottom. She yelled an angry “motherfucker” as a collection of photographs scattered to the sidewalk, caught wind, and flapped across Grand Avenue to the gutter encampment beyond.

Sam instinctively stepped on a loose one. He picked it up.

“Don’t bother,” Spike said.

He grasped another photo off the nearby ground, stubbed a burning hole into it with the last ember of his cigarette, and let the wind take it. Walking into the storage office and returning with a U-Haul, he opened the back. The crew packed in the

locker's former contents.

When the sidewalk and locker were both clear, Latch held her closed fist out to Sam.

"Roshambo," she said.

"For what?" asked Sam.

"Ro," she said, "Sham," and Sam quickly threw out a rock to her paper.

"What'd I win?" Sam asked, and Latch presented the U-Haul's open rear door.

Sam and Eugene hopped in among the detritus, and Spike slammed shut the door behind them. They heard it lock and leaned against the boxes as the van rumbled to a start.

"Whose is all this do you think?" Eugene asked.

Sam shrugged and steadied himself.

When they hit the highway straightaway, he relaxed with a hand in his jean pocket. It struck a wrinkled photo. He must've crammed in a loose one before they all fluttered off. He pulled it out and flattened it.

The photo showed a Black family, five in all, grinning in front of a house. The middle-aged man wore a hat on his head and pride on his face. He held a sign that read "Sold!" The woman next to him wore a blue polka-dot dress, and her outstretched arms collected three children, ranging from awkwardly leaning toddler to sneering teenage boy.

"Guess theirs?" Sam said. "Guess we're movers."

It took Sam the entire trip staring at the family photo before realizing the freshly-painted Victorian behind them looked familiar.

As the van pulled to a stop, he recognized it as the same West Oakland one that the crew had all slept inside of the night before.



BY MAD S LUDVIGSEN.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ON THE THEATER ROOFTOP, Sam pried the photo from his jeans front pocket and passed it around to Pug and Mercia.

“Never found out who they were,” he told them over the rooftop’s gusting wind. “Hanging onto it in case I see them. In case they want it back.”

Sam waited for the wind to soften and give way to the sound of the highway again, then he continued with his story.

The U-Haul’s rear door was ripped skyward and fresh sunlight flooded in. Sam and Eugene protected their eyes with raised forearms. A pair of disembodied hands burst through the sheen to assist Sam and Eugene on their way down onto the concrete lot.

Their eyes followed the rumbling bass nearby to a green truck, the prominent W and M of Waste Management plastered on its hulking side. Spike shared a smoke with a dusty man in a green jumpsuit, and at the end of their mumbled conversation, the bald punk nodded and snapped fingers to his lingering crew.

“Game on,” Dave groaned.

He lifted a box from the U-Haul’s edge and carried it into the metallic yawn of the truck’s trash compactor, then returned for another. Latch and Reggie slipped into the stream of

movement, then Sam and Eugene, the soundtrack only cursory grunts and the rattling thunder-booms above as aircraft that'd materialized over Mt. Diablo bypassed Oakland International for an approach to SFO. They emptied the U-Haul in twenty minutes.

Spike and the garbage man pounded fists, and the crew climbed back into the U-Haul, with vets and newbies swapping seats, the shotgun front seat empty as always.

The opening resonant flex of the compactor hissed, and Spike keyed the U-Haul's ignition, lit a cig, and merged into the traffic on Hegenberger, heading east.

They silently squinted past the sun's glare, their eyelids catching a rest only when the shadows of the 880 highway flicked past. A left onto San Leandro, and from his window Sam read the electronic sign listing upcoming acts at the Oracle. He hadn't heard of Vampire Weekend, but Muse rang a bell.

The U-Haul crept into a block of warehouses on a Fruitvale street and paused outside an office with a bold red sign declaring GENTRY REALTORS.

Spike grabbed his keys, strutted to the double glass doors, and pushed them hard enough that the beige interior blinds lifted, rattled, and settled against the glass in creased slants that allowed for angled glimpses inside. Sam saw Spike walk past the front desk and disappear down a carpeted hallway. As he passed, that half-circle of brunette bob shifted and rose, and Sam saw a woman wearing glasses and a single eyebrow stuck in a raised position, as if painted on. She walked to the front door and with a slight swipe of her hand flattened the blinds again.

Sam leaned over Spike's vacated driver's seat.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Your employer," Dave spit, eyeing the new construction that'd sprouted past the chain-link fence across the street.

Another crash of the blinds against the glass, a firm "easy, asshole" from the brunette bob, and Spike leapt back into the truck. He flung a manila envelope on the dash and brought the U-Haul rumbling back to life.

They turned a corner, then four more, and onto a residential block, where they slowed to an idle next to a squat garage that abutted the sidewalk. It'd been converted, looked like to Sam, with the wide rolling door out front that'd allow for car entry

substituted out for some shabby stucco. A “For Sale by Gentry” sign was planted on the devil’s strip.

Spike pulled his keys, walked around the structure to its rear door, and unlocked the deadbolt that’d been recently, and sloppily, addendized to this technically habitable space.

“They’re already out,” he huffed, and Sam noticed the crew’s tense shoulders relax. Dave led them in.

It was a single room, oddly round, split evenly between carpeted bedroom/living room and tiled kitchen floor. Chairs flanked a wooden board that’d been hung from wires bolted to the wall, and a rotten burnt orange Barcalounger faced a plaster wall of bores and loose wires. Books and plates were scattered on otherwise barren shelves.

On the lone windowless wall hung a framed print: someone’s amateurish, crayon impression of a woman in pink lying prone in a dead field, her outstretched arm reaching to a barn in the distance. The crew furrowed around this for a brief, silent moment before Dave plucked it from the wall and brought it outside. Sam and Eugene grabbed two chairs, but Spike’s stiff-arm blocked the pair.

“Those are worth a few bucks,” he said. “They stay. Take that.”

He pointed to the massive orange lounge. Sam and Eugene maneuvered the weighty nuisance through the slim entry port, then into the truck. An hour later, the apartment was barren, save the scattered items Spike had demarcated as valuable, and they all hopped back into the truck, and unloaded it into another storage locker. Books, hand-drawn sketches, scrapbooks, hand-me-down mugs that said World’s Greatest Whatever, the kinda shit that means everything to one person, but nothing to the rest. Priceless and worthless all at once.

After locking up this new batch, Spike dropped the crew back at the commandeered Victorian just as twilight hit, and they all flowed to various states of sitting and standing around the kitchen table.

“Easy first day, don’t get used to it,” Dave had said to the newbies as he retrieved his first beer from the fridge crisper and cracked it open. “Meds are in there,” and he nodded to a drawer.

Latch took two leaps across the linoleum and yanked it open, grabbed a black leather case, and marched upstairs. Reggie did

the same. Sam took one wordlessly, and Eugene did as well. They unzipped theirs in the stairwell. Inside was a syringe, spoon, rubber hose, lighter, and ball of foil inside.

“Pay’s not bad, I see,” Eugene said.

They parted into their separate rooms, and Sam unfurled a dirty sewage green carpet that’d been rolled up and leaned against the wall. He sat.

Through his window he saw the white harbor cranes, and behind them the orange sky. He watched it shift to red and purple, to a blue haze, then to black. He set his package aside, flipped on a lamp, and read the first five pages of a paperback he’d smuggled out of the Fruitvale home. He slept on the rug with his jacket as blanket, shoes as a pillow.

A pounding on his door woke him the next day, and he scurried to some state of dress and staggered down the stairs. They loaded into the van, and second verse, same as the first: Contents from a storage locker into a U-Haul, then into a dump truck’s trash compactor, then to Fruitvale for a manila envelope, then back on the highway.

This time, Spike took them to that odd section of Temescal between Telegraph and the raised blockade of the freeway. They arrived to the blacks and the whites of two cop cars. Spike greeted the patrol officers with a handshake.

One rose out of his car and knocked loudly on the home’s front door.

An old Black woman appeared, and her expecting smile dissolved into bewilderment. The cop said something to her, opened her metal screen, and led her from the house to the front lawn, where she swayed in a stationary pose like some antique rocking horse. She eyed the truck, then just the blades of grass at her feet.

“Okay,” Spike told the crew, and Dave led them in.

The second cop went inside, returned outside with a stout chair, and set the woman down in it. Dave, Reggie, and Latch began confiscating the items in the woman’s home but really her landlord’s house while Spike held a steady hand to Sam and Eugene.

“Go get some boxes,” he said. “Place is a fucking sty.”

He told them to check the space above the cabin for unformed boxes, and they began folding and taping from their

perch in the rear.

Sam glanced at this woman whose house they were evicting, and he saw her sinewy hands clutch at the chair's ornately-carved handles hard enough that her knuckles looked like pale stars in a black sky. He recognized her.

She was wrinkled and gray-haired, but she was Mrs. Davis, a teacher of his from grade school. She'd taught him math and science.

The screen door from the house next door opened and a man motioned for one of the cops, who nodded and, with a grimace of annoyance, bounded over. They spoke at the man's door, and the cop returned to the seated Mrs. Davis. He brought her to her feet and, arm in arm, they walked around the house to the backyard, out of sight from whatever neighborhoods the scene had disturbed.

"Grab that chair," Spike said.

"How much you think it's worth?" Sam said.

"Twenty," he said.

Sam opened his wallet and handed him a twenty.

"Want it for my room," he said.

Spike pocketed the bill with a shrug, and Sam loaded the chair onto the U-Haul. They finished the eviction and dropped her belongings at the storage locker.

"Will she get them back?" Sam asked Dave.

"If she can afford the cost of renting out one of these for the month, along with whatever movers she'll need to physically lift it away," he said. "So, no. Don't think so, man."

Back at the Victorian over a beer that night, Sam continued to badger Dave about the process: Who are these people? Where do they go? Is this shit legal?

"I'll save you some trouble," he said. "These folks had their chance, and they spent their money on whatever it was they did, and now they have to lose that stuff. Just like any of us. It's a lesson, I guess, if you're looking for one."

Sam spent the days between eviction gigs digging into those questions, and when he couldn't answer any, he began collecting tokens.

A photo, a scrapbook, an antique plate, a mixtape, a globe stuck full of color-coded push pins in various cities around the world, markers left behind of an inquisitive or overly-extravagant

past life, depending on one's perspective. He removed the pins from the globe and, after each moving operation, he'd use them on a map of Oakland to mark down the home where he retrieved the presumed beloved keepsake, along with the date of when. Really, the only two bits of information he had access to. He wasn't sure when he'd get them back to their owners, or even if he'd ever get the chance to try, but he had to keep track anyway.

"Things changed next week," Sam told Pug and Mercia on the theater roof. "We were out in East Oakland, and Spike saw me grab a stuffed teddy bear. Looked like a kid's. Before we left, I made a note of the address. He must've seen me mark it down. All looking back is hindsight or whatever, but the next day, I saw Dave and Spike sharing a few smokes, suspiciously looking my way."

His voice cracked just as the highway whoosh in the distance faded away. He continued.

"Came back to my room one of those nights and Eugene was in my chair, needle in his arm," he said. "Not the first time he'd raided my stash. That was fine. He knew I didn't use. But this time he wasn't breathing. Cold. Purple. Dead for hours."

"It was a hot shot," Pug said. "Laced with fentanyl. Got the results after they found him, after the rats had gotten to him."

Sam nodded, and the tears welling in his eyes made them appear as though they were floating.

"Thought so," Sam said. "Didn't like the feel of it all. When I knew there wasn't anything I could do for him, I bolted. Couldn't trust Spike, couldn't trust any of them. Went back to the camps. First at 6th and Brush, then a few nights at Here/There."

Sam breathed deeply before the next part.

"A day into that camp, I heard these groans coming from a tent," he said. "A few folks around headed over, and they asked what was wrong. I couldn't get out, I was so tired. Couldn't even stand up. So I just rolled to the opening and watched them gather around this tent, worm their way inside, and pull out this body. Body of a woman. Three of them brought her out, one lifting her legs, one her shoulders, one cradling her head, gently but holding on, like she's made of paper, like a breeze would blow her away."

The first leak from Sam's eyes spilled down his cheek and

carved a dark line down his skin.

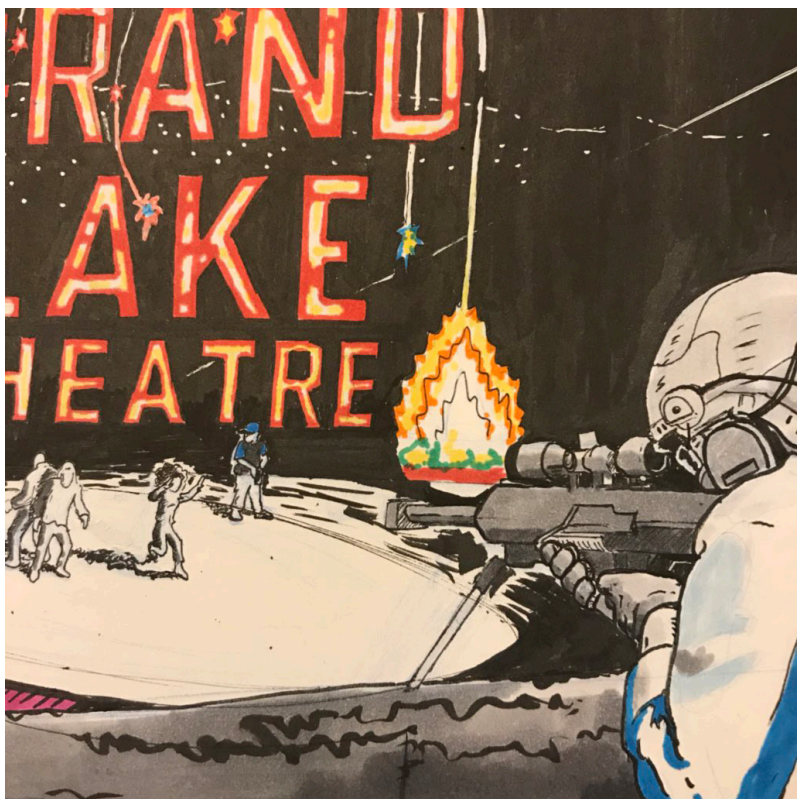
“After trying to revive her, they all stepped back to consider what was next, and as they parted, I could see her face. It was Mrs. Davis, that old teacher of mine,” he said. “She’d died in the night cold.”

He wiped away a tear, sucked in a breath, and set his jaw.

“So, I rushed back to my own tent and tried to figure this shit out,” Sam said, and gripped his knees and pulled his hood back over his head. “That led me to Coletti. And soon enough, that led me to figure that the man had to go.”

They thought they heard the highway whoosh intensify and then the wind picked up and rippled their clothes. Pug looked up into the night sky and saw an oddly shaped expanse of black with blinking red lights blotting out the stars behind.

In the next moment, before he could even squawk out a question or warning, the trio was bathed in the pure white of the helicopter searchlight.



BY YUNG COCONUT.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE ALABASTER CONE CAME FROM THE NIGHT to coat the three in its glow, and the whirring helicopter blades blasted them with a cyclone.

Sam scampered from the spotlight like a damn vampire at daybreak to crawl into the safety of the moonlit fog. He tripped and hustle-crawled on all fours to the open rooftop hatch, but when he peered down, a flashlight burst from inside and illuminated his face. Sam crab-walked back into the helicopter spotlight again.

“Don’t fucking move!” a tinny, static-coated voice shouted from the distance over the gusty chaos.

Pug squinted, raised an open hand to his forehead to obscure the spotlight, and the buzzing voice cried again.

“I said don’t fucking move!”

Pug froze and saw the haze of flashing blue-and-reds perched on a barren stretch of the 580. Two blockades of patrol cars had parked a hundred feet or so in either direction to stall the highway into twin snarls of floating headlights. Drivers commuting in this late hour spilt from their stalled cars to lean over the rail and aim their cell cameras at the action.

Pug made out that shit Lieutenant Grately at the megaphone,

and his long brown trenchcoat billowed behind in the wind.

“You’re lucky we didn’t blow your brains out,” Grately screamed. “Stay in the light, all of you, and hold those hands the fuck up!”

Sam stood hesitant and vulnerable, like he’d just exited a pool into the winter air. He raised his arms, and his t-shirt rippled in the helicopter breeze. Mercia raised hers too, and then Pug, who was again blinded by the spotlight.

“Now turn the fuck around!” he heard from beyond the glare.

They did, and Pug watched a black shadow rise from the rooftop trap door like some amorphous specter. In the background gray of the building next door, it coalesced into human shape, followed by one, two, three more of the same. Flashlights aimed parallel to guns as the figures stalked forward.

The lights from the Grand Lake sign revealed Frank in the middle, taking on some command role. Frank holstered his light, kept his gun steady, and phoned a code over his radio.

“They’re gonna cuff you!” screamed Grately from the highway. “Do what they fucking say.”

“Hey guys,” Frank screamed, barely louder than a whisper in the helicopter roar. “Any weapons?”

“Don’t have that kinda fuck-around money,” Pug yelled. “Mercia sure as hell doesn’t either. And Sam sure as hell don’t either,” he motioned to Sam, whose eyes were focused on the bulbs of the rooftop sign. They reflected in his brown eyes and gave them an epoxy sheen.

“Why not drop those guns a bit to cool down everybody’s nerves,” Pug said. “You got us covered from the damn highway and the damn sky. We ain’t gonna do anything dumb. We don’t want to die tonight.”

Frank mumbled out an “Okay, okay,” to either side. The cops flanking him shifted their aim to feet of their prey.

“We’re gonna come over there, and we’re gonna search you—not because we don’t trust you, but because we got to,” Frank said, walking toward them, “then we’re gonna cuff you, then bring you down off this roof.”

The friends remained motionless, and for the first time that evening, maybe from the late hour chill cascading off the lake with the seeming sole intention of rattling your bones, or maybe from the internal heat boiling over from their curdled nerves

within, or maybe from some combination thereof, Pug and Mercia and Sam all exhaled and billowed vapor into the night. It seemed to merge into a single puff and then it floated away.

The cops finished their approach. Frank observed from behind, gun at his side. He radioed more code, and the cops began their pat down, under the arms, down the sides. Pug kept watch on the bulky Latino officer to his left, whose hand seemed to grip as it sidled down Mercia's waist. She winced into a slight squirm and Pug watched the cop's face for the smirk that soon came.

"C'mon, man," Pug muttered, and the cop glared at him and squeezed Mercia's hips once more in a declaration of ownership.

She shook her head for Pug to leave it, and Frank hissed some inaudible warning, and the feelsy cop stopped. Pug nodded thanks, but before Frank returned the look, the night's true ruckus began.

One of those moments, when you've been at it long as myself, when you know the end's inevitability, even if you don't quite know the path it's gonna take to get there.

"Give it back!"

The rooftop's attention circled to Sam, who was screaming at the scrawny Black cop in glasses who was flicking at some flat object. Pug realized all at once that it was that damn, crinkled photograph of the family, something that the cop should've left well enough alone, a realization that dawned on the cop's face too in the moment of time right before the blur of Sam's right hook. It clocked his jaw and sent him unconscious to the ground.

"No!" Pug forced out, and Mercia lunged for Sam's sweatshirt but caught only its hood, which tore at the seam. It dangled from her long and calloused fingers as Sam ran into the tailing spotlight to the rooftop's edge.

"Hands! Hands!" Grately screamed on the loudspeaker.

Sam didn't raise them. He turned to face his friend, sister, and the nearby cops, all with their guns drawn still, but now aimed to kill. Behind him, the chorus of squad cars squealed next to the snipers on the highway.

"Sam, what are you doing!" Pug screamed.

"None of this shit matters," Sam said. "Dead here or dead there, same result."

Pug took two steps to his friend.

“Don’t have to be that way, bruh.”

“Don’t move,” screamed the Latino cop, but Pug ignored him. Frank motioned an order to stand down. Mercia followed, and Sam’s breath escaped to be sucked upward by the vacuum from the hovering chopper blades and then torn into nothing.

“Give us a chance here, bud,” Pug said.

“You owe us one.” Mercia’s turn.

“They ain’t never gonna understand,” Sam spoke with a catch.

“Maybe they will,” Pug said.

“These shits want nothing more than to pop your Black ass right out here right now,” Mercia said, “don’t give them the satisfaction.”

They took two steps closer, and Sam inched back so that his heel hung off the edge, three stories above the Lake Park Avenue pavement, cleared of pedestrians due to that night’s rooftop performance. He swung his arms wildly to regain his balance, found it, and sighed an exhausted smile of some relief.

“Alright, kid,” Frank said, standing equal with Pug and Mercia, his gun away. “C’mon off and let’s talk this through.”

Sam’s smile broke and his eyes squinted and filled with tears.

“Just didn’t want him hurting any more folks,” Sam said. “It’s not fair, not fair.”

“We know, we all know that,” Pug said. “And you’ll get to tell everyone all that in court. And they’ll have to listen.”

“Fucking Coletti,” Sam said. “Coletti,” he spit.

“Come on off your cross,” Mercia pled. “Step on down here with me. They’ll all know about him soon enough.”

“Think so,” he squirmed. “Think so?”

“I do, I believe so,” Mercia said, and held her arms out, beseeching him down into the sanctuary of her body.

Pug turned to her and saw a tiny dot of neon red quiver on her chest. He looked down to his own and saw the same. Confused, he grabbed at it, and the dot lifted from his chest to his hand, vibrating. He followed the beam to the highway across and saw a trio of lasers cutting through the mist.

“Come on down,” Mercia said.

Pug heard a shuffle behind him, and turned to see Frank speak hushed code into his radio. A laser red line swept into Pug’s eye and his vision filled with scarlet, until the beam dipped back behind Sam’s silhouette.

“Think so,” Sam stated, and he pitched forward, toward Mercia, to the safety of her rooftop embrace.

As he did, sensing again the situation’s tenseness, he rose his hands to his sides. Pug sensed movement and turned to see Frank extend himself toward Mercia.

“Wait,” Pug trailed off as a hot wisp of air ran past his ear.

He saw Sam’s arms extended to his sides to prepare for his hug, his hands now even with his shoulders. And then a dot of red appeared on his chest, this one darker than the ones before, and a moment later, the gunshot echoed through the foggy night, and then the red spread outward like an expanding border of a colonizing force.

“Sam?” Mercia asked in utter puzzlement.

Her question was muffled by the crunching collision of bones and equipment as Frank tackled her to the rooftop. Pug sensed a flash of movement behind and he was down as well. The cops dug their knees and elbows into various pain points, and a hand smashed his face against the roof. Through the blur, Pug saw Sam enfold his arms in a terrible confusion, stagger one, two steps on the ledge like some North Beach drunk. Then he was gone from view.

Pug now heard the raucous yells of command and Mercia’s guttural cries over them, and he closed his eyes to let the helicopter wind cool his skin and drown out the rest.

A crinkled square of glossy paper fluttered in the fresh breeze, convulsed in a slight hover, rose an inch or so above the ground, and settled again. Then suddenly the photograph was sucked away off the roof with a plucked force.

It flapped in front of the theater’s venerable rooftop sign, discovered a tunnel of still air, and floated down in the oblivious calm of the flashing reds and blues. It spent a few moments glittering in the pure white of the marquee lights before it was carried off to wherever it went to next.

Part V

Arrears



BY RYAN THE TRUCK.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

DIVES CLOSED TO RENOVATE then never came back, but the ones that did re-opened with trenches of fancy taplines that walled off those who'd only come for well whiskies and \$2 cans. SROs converted codes to raise the "respectfulness" of their clientele, and rickety warehouses found room for the overflow as the city looked past violations to sell its reputation of vibrancy. It sent a shiver down my spine when I saw them poke their golden shovels into the freshly-tilled soil next to MacArthur BART.

Months later, on a clear, warm, star-pocked night, our hero, Milo Arnold—but you'd know him now by "Pug"—cycled past the hazy amber floods securing the scaffolding that'd sprouted up, as if those shovels had planted seeds of rebar. He took his eyes off the road to examine the rare construction, and his rubber tires crunched on the sprinkled glass that once was a car window. He pedaled faster to avoid the crunch of traffic on 40th that mostly ignored the designated bike lane that'd been painted a bright green, and he passed by another new bar decorated in unearned rust.

Thirty-two years old now, his skull shaved like a newborn except for the fresh tattoos of flickering flames rising up from the back of his neck. He'd also traded in his jeans for the

ankle-length shorts of a rockabilly. His facial scar had healed up nicely since his trip down the BART stairs, and his fractured arm was back in its basic form aside from the occasional elbow pain whenever he reached behind his back, which he was doing now, come to think of it, to hang onto the black insulated bag that bore the cutesy logo of the tech app delivery gig for which he was currently technically on the clock.

Pug made a left on Broadway, hung a right on 41st past Geo Kaye's, sweated up the hill into Piedmont, and was now twirling through the curves of this sudden suburbia labyrinthian sprawl meant to confuse the low-incomes during invasion. Pug took a few lefts, some more rights, and rolled to a stop. He squinted at the white block address numbers on the curb.

"Shit," Pug rode ahead and the numbers rose, and so he circled back around the way he'd come. "Hell."

He found his goal, but pulled his phone out of his pocket to make sure. He lay his bike on the manicured lawn with the grace of a jock tossing a spent gym bag and walked to the three-story mansion. He pressed the digital doorbell, and it chimed a few bars of the Super Smash Bros. theme. The hand-carved front door withdrew, and behind it stood a kid in a sweatshirt.

"Took your time," the kid said.

He wore a sleek, black headset, and Pug looked past him to a hardwood room the size of a damn gymnasium, yet furnished with only a single leather recliner, an empty table, and the biggest and clearest television screen he'd ever seen.

"My apologies," Pug said, and shifted the insulation pack forward on his shoulder. "Traffic," he unzipped it.

Pug withdrew a hefty plastic bag and the foil-wrapped "super burrito" inside. He handed it over.

"It's carnitas?"

"Just like you ordered," Pug said. "But I wouldn't know for sure unless you want me to grab a bite."

The kid felt the burrito's weight, and a questioning glance formed. He reached his bare hand into the bag.

"It's cold."

Pug sent his hands out, palms open, lit phone in his hand blasting enough white on his face to give it a sickly glow.

"What do you want from me?" Pug said.

"I'm gonna have to write this in the review."

“Then it’s only fair to warn you that if you do,” Pug flicked off his phone, pitching his face into the black of night. “I know where you live.”

“This threat is also going in the review,” the kid held up his phone, showing off Pug’s profile. “I have all your information here, dumbass.”

“Okay listen, fuck-fuck. You can write whatever you want, it doesn’t matter to me. You think you’re complaining to the boss, speaking to my manager, but the real of it is, for people like me, we don’t have a boss,” Pug said. “We have dozens of ‘em. And what one gives a shit about, the others don’t.”

Pug reached into the plastic bag and withdrew a tortilla chip.

“You write that review, you better start getting used to the taste of spit in your food,” Pug brought the chip to his mouth. “There are more of us than you realize. And we talk to each other. And we’re coming fucking sooner than you all know.”

The chip’s crackle amplified and echoed in Pug’s hollow mouth. The little techie slowly backed into his house and urged the door shut with his foot. The living room light flicked off.

“Fuckin’ techies,” Pug muttered, and back onto his bike he went.

He pressed a button on his phone to get him another few bucks from the app that facilitated this bringing of late snacks to young shut-ins, completed the rest of the Piedmont climb, and soon tipped forward off the hill crest down to Grand Avenue.

The kid had a point in his grievance, honestly. Pug took an out-of-the-way route on the delivery, and so yes, the kid’s burrito was needlessly late and cold. But the path advised by the map app went past that damn theater, past a corner of Oakland that couldn’t be traversed anymore, not by Pug, nope, not after what happened to Sam.

His death had made some light news, but the only footage was from grainy, shaky cell-cams that blurred when the pop-pop-pops of the gunshots blasted. None caught the impact or the fall. The news ran with it the night of, but there wasn’t enough to extend it into multiple cycles, so Sam’s name was simply added to the forever ledger instead of becoming a rallying cry.

William Coletti’s name was broadcast plenty, however, with news orgs tracking every step of his miraculous recovery from that near-assassination at Fairyland. Grately had apparently just

been trying to apply some added pressure during the interrogation, April figured out to Pug one night over beers. Coletti's resurrection roll-out was intense and swift. A well-groomed online mini-doc mentioned his million-to-one lotto ticket. Some PR team curated B-roll footage of the flushed developer swearing at his physical trainer to lead a few segments of the local news. The Chronicle ran a few weeks' worth of stories. Then, that was all for awhile.

Sam's family moved on as best they could. Mercia hung for the wake and interment, Sam's ashes crammed into a slot next to gramps in the Chapel of the Chimes. The ceremony itself was that sort of awkward that inhabits early deaths, of which they'd all been to their share, a mix of confusion and sorrow, stirred with unspoken justifications that the poor dead must be blamed themselves somehow, if only to disempower the demons of random happenstance and systemic causes.

Mercia returned to L.A. She couldn't stick around, "No, not one night longer," she'd told Pug at a Mama's Royal breakfast after the funeral. He paid in bills and random coins, and eyed her car on Broadway, jammed to the brim with the last of her Oakland belongings. Mostly pillows and clothes, but also stacked boxes of yearbook remnants and past projects you hold onto for your eventual biographer or for the dumpster.

She told Pug it was dumb to keep all that stuff "up here" anyway, away from where she lived her life now. He hadn't heard from her since, beyond the occasional social media like.

"Any goodies?" Harriet stubbed out a cigarette with a white-soled sneaker against the neon green-lit sidewalk outside The Alley.

"Nothing great," Pug reached into his pack and pulled out a small paper hat, a few tortilla chips still inside. They were free upon request at the taco truck, not that anyone ever asked, due to their inedible nature. But Harriet dug them for some reason.

"Ah, rad," she snatched the bag and popped the first chip into her mouth. Her jaw dislodged and made a sound, that snapping sound, that damn snapping sound, and Pug slammed shut his eyes and cracked his neck to relieve the new drill whirring inside his skull. After his rent had been raised, Pug capitulated, gave a month's notice, and got his deposit check back, save the cost of a few wall scrapes from his bike handles. He spent a few weeks

trying to find a room for under \$1,000 before taking Harriet up on her offer to cram into her one-bedroom in Lakeshore. That jawsnap that he'd somehow never noticed before had rattled him to sleep every night since.

"Any more deliveries?" she asked.

"Off the clock," he jammed his phone into his pocket, "I'm back to being my own boss man now."

"For sure," she offered.

They walked through the swinging wooden doors of The Alley, and Harriet hooked a left into the back. Before Pug could follow, that tiny scheming punk Tor, his hair now purple but the leather jacket black as ever, held out a halting arm. Two full Blue Moon bottles hung from his middle and ring finger like suctioned-on nail extensions. He sipped from a third.

"What is it, Tor?" Pug plucked a bottle off the punk's finger with a bubblegum pop. He took a swig. Warm.

"It's not what you could do for me, my man, but what I can do for you," Tor smiled in a way where his face seemed to be rejecting the rest of his skull. "Got another caper."

They shifted to the odd front booth, bathed in radioactive red neon glow from a sign outside, and Tor laid out his scheme. It involved laying claim to some two-bedroom apartments, throwing in bunk beds, and renting it to newly imported tech transplants as a live slash work commune.

"We get bean bags, lava lamps, grocery schedules, whatever the fuck these little fucks like," Tor said. "Really sell that hippy history shit, you know? And wi-fi or modems, all those wires they need for that. We could make a fortune, bruh."

He wasn't wrong, Pug knew, but the idea was missing an important step.

"Okay, so how do we get enough money to buy a two-bedroom, let alone many two-bedrooms?"

"That, I haven't figured yet," Tor slurred. "And that's where I'm assuming where you'd come in," and he pointed to Pug with a wink.

"I don't think you understand how this—" Pug started, and paused as the twinkling piano chords drifting in from the bar's back to dominate over the sounds of the A's postgame show. They'd been shut out by the Indians, 2-0, the first of 74 losses that season. But Pug was less worried about the recap, more

about the added pep to the American Songbook renditions being struck on the piano.

“What the hell is that?” Pug thrust a finger over Tor, who shifted his weight and twirled. “That’s not Dibble.”

“New piano guy,” Tor said. “Dibble’s on some time off, a day or so, here and there.”

“The fuck is that about,” Pug said.

He stood and pushed past.

“Could be worse,” Tor said, “he could be dead.”

Pug stepped into the booth adjacent the piano, Harriet and Tommy sipping gin and tonics inside. They watched this slick new pianist with a thin mustache and black hat. Pug sat and gulped down his room temp Blue Moon.

“The hell is this?” he nodded.

“Winds of change,” Tommy nodded at the usurper. “Blowing like always, but seems like a hurricane now.”

Pug twisted to the wall, and his fingers began to stroke across a row of business cards that’d been stapled to the bar wall, shaded brown before the smoking bans.

“Everything changes,” Harriet said. “Change doesn’t mean automatically bad.”

Pug pulled his thumb and forefinger into a flick, and struck one of the business cards. The force ripped it from its hold. It twirled in the air with gyroscopic force and slid to a stop on their wooden table.

It faced Pug and Tommy, and they craned their necks to see what lost history Pug had dislodged. Staring back was the bolded name of Trey Fox, and underneath it, his role as “Head Wrangler.”

It was for an institution named “COLETTI’S CREW.”

Beneath that was a phone number, beneath that an address.

Pug and Tommy locked eyes.

“Christ, does this mean what I think it does?” Harriet asked, and Pug casually slid the card off the table, into his pocket.



BY DARRYL JONES.

Chapter Thirty

THE BLINDING SUN OF THE LATE AFTERNOON blazed across the yellow Camaro's hood and straight through the windshield. Tommy flipped down the driver's side visor in disgust, and Pug squinted through his bushy eyebrows, the only hair left on his head, which shielded the glare enough to allow him to compare the addresses on the Maxwell Park row.

"Wait," Pug said. He grasped Tommy's bicep and consulted the business card again. "We passed it," he said. "Go back one."

Tommy looked to the rear and in doing so blinded himself again, so with disdain he swung the Camaro over into a street spot. The pair eyed the shaggy two-story house hidden behind a rampart of tall pines. It was covered in redwood shingles, which arched to a point at the top.

This was COLETTI'S CREW HQ, according to the business card, and confirmed in an interview request from Pug's "Milo Arnold" email address, reserved for business inquiries, of which frankly he had few.

Pug had said he was writing a profile of the "very important" project for an online pub with hipster repute, and that he was hoping for an in-person interview to give the piece some shine. Of course, they consented.

“We have a plan?” Tommy spoke into the side window, and his hot breath fogged to life a nickel-sized ghost for a brief moment in time.

“You bring that camera?” Pug said, and Tommy answered with a blank stare of wall-eyed confusion. “Well, you have your damn phone at least?”

Tommy retrieved it from his back pocket with a glowing smile.

“Just act professional then,” Pug said, and noticed reluctance on Tommy’s face. “It’s pretty basic shit, man.”

They exited the Camaro and crossed the street. They ducked through the pines and strode to the front door, where Pug knuckle-knocked on the muffling wood, then on the rattling windowpane. He saw a flicker of movement through the glass, and a beat later, the door crept open.

“Sup,” said the kid behind it, couldn’t’ve been more than 12 years old. He had a purple hood pulled over his head that shaded his brown skin darker in the shadow. “Can I help?”

“We’re here to see Trey Fox,” Pug said. “We have an appointment.”

The kid swung the door closed and yelled in a voice deeper than you’d’ve thought possible. “Yo, Trey!” and the kid pulled open the door again, “He’ll be down in a second.” The kid stepped aside with a presentational flourish to allow Tommy and Pug inside, and the heavy door rolled shut behind.

Pug eyed the foyer. There was a full-length mirror with empty hat racks against one wall and a bare backdrop of burnt auburn wood on the other, the rorschach of its carefully ordered grain giving the impression of great wealth. Down the narrow hall ahead was a row of coat hooks, each filled with identical purple hoodies, under which rested a row of perfectly paired white shoes. From ahead came the sound of a faint, hollow trickling, like a factory of plastic rattles.

“Can I get you gentlemen a beverage of some sort?” the kid asked, and peered into the tile white of the kitchen just off the foyer. Against the far wall, the fridge sat with its door tilted open, the brown arm of another kid draped over as he looked inside. “Rickey, what we got!” the greeter screamed.

“Coke, Diet Coke, like two Pepsis, Mountain Dew,” a high-pitched voice rang out from inside the fridge. “Snapple, Diet

Snapple.” Pause. “Looks like milk.”

“Have any water?” Pug asked.

“Rickey! Two waters!”

The kid in the fridge exited with two waters bottled in plastic that sweat as he carried them to the guests. He had a gap-toothed smile under his miniaturized dark wide-rimmed glasses. He handed them over.

“Thanks, kid,” Tommy said. “Say Rickey, what’s that weird noise I’m hearing down that-a-way.”

“Work,” Rickey nodded him along. “C’mon along.”

The two kids bracketed Pug and Tommy down the hallway. The leading Rickey side-stepped when they approached an open doorway. Pug and Tommy peered inside.

It was a large, sunken living room with cheap wood paneling that expanded outward into a low-ceiling addition of aluminum, plywood, and plastic windows. It looked like a kids’ playroom growing a neglected conservatory tumor.

Against the walls was a row of computer terminals, and each was populated by a young kid, Black or Latino to the eye, not a white in sight, who typed with hypnotic focus. They all wore their sweatshirt hoods up, and most had earbuds in. Every now and then, they’d look at the wall above their computers, where a wide mirror had been placed. They eyed some information that was on two white dry erase boards, placed side-by-side in the middle of the room and filled with black scrawl, and then returned to their furious typing.

“What is it you guys do?” Pug asked.

Tommy held his phone up at the scene, and his finger tapped to rattle off a series of shots.

“Data entry,” Rickey said, and into the air around Tommy’s head came an arm that grazed his nose before it snatched his phone away.

“Sorry,” they turned into a tall, Black man with trimmed hair like a helmet and thick glasses that seemed like the older brother to the pair on Rickey’s face. “No photos in this room,” his thumb scrolled across Tommy’s phone with experienced strokes. “Got to delete ‘em.”

A second later, he handed it back.

“You must be from VICE,” the man said, and reached with a grinning handshake. “Trey Fox, pleasure to meet you.” Pug

recognized him from that chaotic night at Fairyland, seemingly a lifetime ago. “Thought you guys would be with a video crew. Or is this just pre-scouting for the film day?”

Pug glanced at Tommy then turned back to Trey.

“Vice dot com, the website,” Pug said. “Pretty straight forward news post.”

“Oh,” Trey said, disappointment washing over his face. He silently led them down another hall and into an office, where Pug and Tommy took seats across as he closed the door behind them.

They spent the next thirty minutes in there. Pug peppered questions and pretended to scribble answers, but mostly jotted down random notes for fear of a memory lapse:

kids, kids, kids
computer room,
rich, Black, Mexicans??
sodas,
Trey's big desk
framed photo
handshake w/ T. & Coletti
founder and funder
“coding camp”
talking

Pug's scrawl stopped.

“What's that actually, wait, wait,” Pug re-read the note. “So, that's the coding camp. That's what they're all doing in there?”

“Coletti's Crew Coding Camp,” Trey said, standing up. “It's the key to our outreach.”

Trey fingered the plastic blinds and looked out the window as he lectured.

“Did you know that Google is currently 60 percent white and 30 percent Asian.” He turned back around. “At Facebook, that combination is 94 percent. Now the reason for that isn't some inherent racism on the part of the tech companies. They're just companies, looking for the best hires they can find. What it is is a systemic undereducation in our most neglected areas.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Tommy nodded along.

“Programs like Coletti's Crew attempts to close this gap that's

persisted,” Trey said, “really since the founding of America.”

“My man,” and Tommy threw out a fist. Trey pounded back emotionless.

“These camps are ways to immerse our students for many hours all at once, allowing them to catch up in a way,” Trey said.

“And the William Coletti connection,” Pug asked, looking at his notes. “He’s a big reason we’re doing this story now, you know, his recovery from getting shot and all.”

“Mr. Coletti is our financier,” Trey said. “He funds it through an endowment, and sets the general goals. But he gives me and my team the leeway needed to best translate the work skills that are valued in Silicon Valley into this training environment.”

“Any idea how much money he gives?” Pug asked.

“I do,” Trey said, “but can’t say. I think it’s all public, though, so that’s work for you.”

Pug scribbled, and Tommy bashfully held up his phone.

“Mind if I snap some photos?” he said.

“Thought you’d be using something more like,” Trey hesitated and brushed his shirt crisp, “a camera, I guess.”

“It’s the website,” Tommy said, “so, you know, this’ll do.”

Trey limped to a seat on top of his desk with a huff of indignation. “And sorry for deleting those photos,” he said. “We have certain NDAs, and of course, privacy concerns, them being adolescents and all.”

Tommy snapped three or four with his phone, and Trey’s smile faded as he asked if they had enough for the piece, but in a way that already suggested the answer was yes.

Pug rattled off a few more innocuous questions to close out the charade before they all shook hands and Trey swiftly left the room. They were led out by a new kid, this one holding a plastic bottle of Sunny-D, and they got back into Tommy’s Camaro.

“Seems legit,” Tommy said. “Grown-ups trying to help community kids. At worst, some tax write off for Coletti in exchange for neighborhood goodwill.”

Pug tapped his pen against his front teeth in thought, and the setting sun shone across his sweating bald head.

“Don’t know, bruh,” Tommy said, and revved the car. “Seems like nothing.”

He pulled into the street and took a purposefully roundabout way to get on the 880. They headed west into the violet sunset

haze that lit the distant cranes, then swerved onto the 980 and got off at 17th. They passed a burgeoning tent encampment that had expanded even further near Grand, turned up Telegraph, and parked.

Pug swung open the half-doors of Commonwealth and found Harriet in the corner of the cramped side room, the remnants of a pitcher and two clean glasses resting on an unsteady circular wooden table.

“Dead end,” Pug said, and poured what was left into his glass as he walked Harriet through their meeting.

“Guess I’ll grab another then,” Tommy retrieved the empty pitcher and left for the bar.

“Aw, hell,” Harriet said, and rubbed his shoulder. She shifted her eyes to look into his. “Let me ask you this then, little buddy. What’s the one thing that sticks in your craw from today?”

Pug blinked, and thought about that, and let the monotonous drone of the soccer match on the TV in the corner that for some reason someone gave a shit about wash over him.

“Well,” he said, “he was acting weird about all those photos.”

“What photos?”

Pug explained how Tommy was snapping the computer room, of all those coders coding code or whatever the fuck it was they did, and how Trey had physically snatched his phone away to delete them.

“That certainly is weird as shit,” Harriet said as Tommy returned with a refreshed pitcher. “You check the cloud?” she said to them both.

“The what?” Tommy said.

“The cloud, you know,” she waved her hands above her head in some indiscriminate pattern. “The damn cloud. Here,” and she snatched Tommy’s phone, and thumbed through it as if she was possessed.

“The fuck you up to?” Tommy said, and Pug threw out a calming hand.

A half-pint later, Harriet set the phone on the table and flipped it to them.

“These,” she said.

“You’re some kind of witch,” Tommy said.

Pug flipped through the dozen or so shots that Tommy had taken. “Not a single clear one,” Pug murmured, and then

somehow discovered one that was miraculously focused.

It showed the entire expanse of the room: the computer terminals, the hooded kids pounding away at their stations, the line of mirrors above, the set of dry erase boards off at an angle too steep to read.

Harriet angled her neck for a look.

“What are they doing anyway?” she asked. “And what are those?”

She zoomed in and hovered a finger over the row of mirrors above the terminals.

“The kids read their directions for coding off those boards or something off,” Tommy said. “More efficient or some shit.”

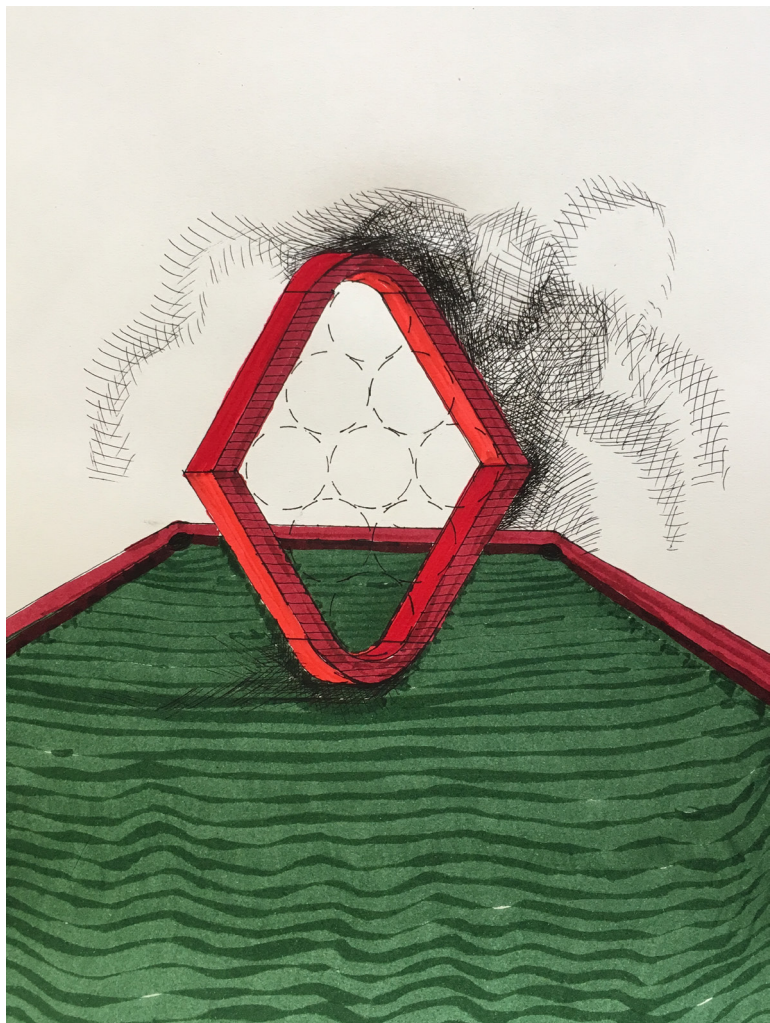
Pug zoomed in further, then zoomed in on the mirror again. Even with the high resolution, he couldn’t read the dry erase board, but did know they were a series of names. Some had lines struck through them, but all were illegible since they were scrawled in reverse.

“Can’t read shit,” Tommy said.

Harriet snatched the phone again, and her thumbs began to work their magic again. In moments, she returned the phone, and the names had been corrected, the image clear.

“Holy shit,” Pug said, as he read out one of the names, less harsh across the tongue than her son’s.

“Lydia Grace.”



BY BENJAMIN FIFE.

Chapter Thirty-One

THE DRUNKS IN SUITS that'd gathered in the early afternoon happy hour groaned and shielded their eyes from the sun as Pug entered the Ruby Room from the street.

"Sorry, sorry," he said bashfully and pulled shut the door behind.

He nodded to the bartender, Emily, in her black zip-up as ever. She shimmied over to him, and her droopy earlobes, once home to twin 20 millimeter plugs but long emptied, swung like fleshy pendulums.

"What's cookin', Pug," she said, dimples appearing. "Been a few."

"It has, it has," he smiled.

Emily pulled a can of chilled Tecate from a fridge below, snapped its tab open with a "key-chew" sound, and slid it across the bar. Pug sipped.

"She in her office?" he asked.

Emily stifled a look of disappointment and unfurled a presenting arm to welcome Pug deeper inside, and off he went.

He passed the row of functioning alcoholics, then a Latino kid who ordered the vinyl records he kept in a milk crate with swift, synchronized fingers. Pug pushed open the glass backdoor

into the smokers' room, and his face struck an invisible mass of hovering density. The loud whir of an exhaust fan overhead announced his entrance, and two burly fellas with jackets more patches than leather paused their pool game to glimpse the new entrant.

"Royce fucking Grace!" Pug shouted.

"What?" one of the players shifted into aggro mode a bit too quickly and contorted his face into a mad-dog glare. "The fuck did you say?"

Pug held up a quivering, cautioning finger.

"The message was for the lady, actually," and he pointed behind them. They turned to the room's back corner where, surrounded by loose papers and looking ghostly in her cellophane cloud of cigarette smoke, sat April. She glanced at Pug, took a full drag from the last of her stub, and returned to her notepad.

"I'll second the man's question," she exhaled through constant bursts of smoke puffs. "What the fuck did you say?"

Pug navigated around the table, paying careful mind not to errantly bump elbows or resting drinks, and took a seat next to April.

"Fucking Coletti," he said.

"What are you rambling about?" April said, and the room's exhaust fan suddenly whirred again. They watched the pool players suddenly leave, their balls still scattered on top of the table. "Guess your bullshit's even too much for those pool bros."

"Check this," and Pug caught her up.

He relayed his beers at The Alley, flicking at those random business cards, making the official appointment with Coletti's Crew under the believable guise of freelance writer. "No one checks on this shit now anyways," he said, and April nodded into her martini's bottom.

He told her about the sunken room with all those computers, and the kids at their battle stations, future techies learning skills they'd need to be relevant in the next iteration of whatever this hell economy was destined to become. He told her about the dry erase board, and the names on it, including that of her old client's mother. He flipped to a photo saved on his phone for proof.

"So, like," she paused and lit a new cigarette before bringing further coherence into her line of questioning. "Like, what the fuck?"

“What the fuck, indeed,” Pug nodded. “Let me walk you through it like this.”

He stood up and rested his ass on the pool table’s side rim.

“Let’s say you already have someplace to live, but you’re sick of throwing your money in the bank and collecting fuck-all on interest,” he started. “You want to put that money somewhere where it’ll multiply into even more, right? One place to do that is the stock market. But that shit’s only exciting to nerds with enough time. For those who want a little more tangible action with their investment, there’s property.”

He turned to the pool table, slid the triangular wooden rack in front of him, and filled it with four solid billiard balls.

“But you don’t have the money to build your own place, that’s for the developers with deep pockets,” he said. “You want to buy something that’s already been made, meaning it already has people living in it, paying rent.”

He reached to the wall across where the diamond-shaped rack hung on a nail, long neglected in the ruby-colored haze. He grabbed it, deposited it onto the felt next to triangle, and filled it with another four solids.

“But you’re smart, right?” he said, and by now April stood next to him, watching Pug wave his hand over the paired racks. “You don’t want to buy a place with four old tenants, paying the same rent they’ve had since 1973. You want the one with the freshest tenants.”

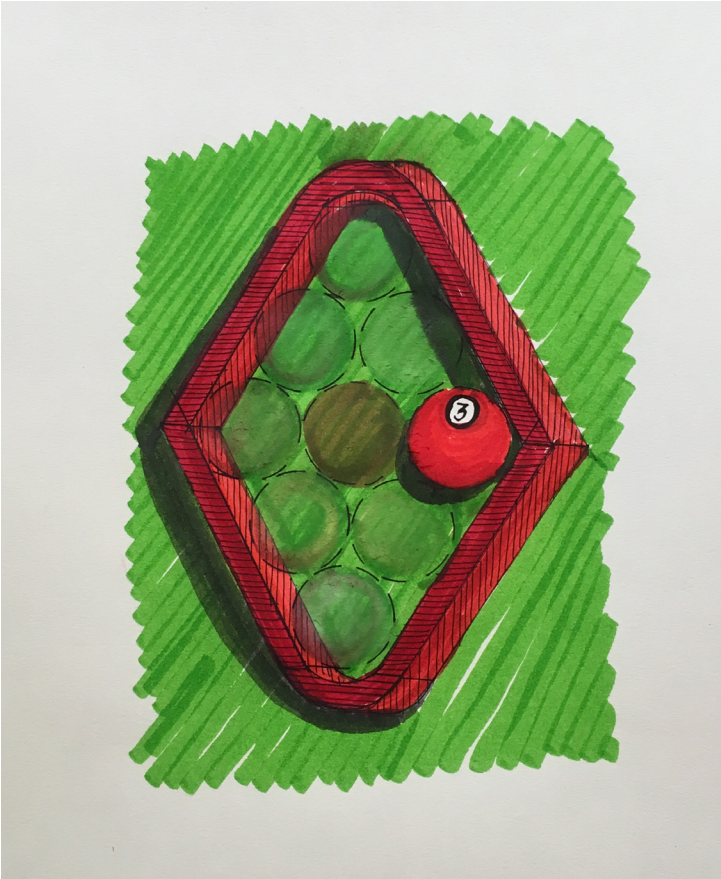
He reached to the diamond rack and plucked out three solids, replacing them with striped balls.

“Or, better than that, an empty place where nobody lives at all.” Pug reached into the triangle rack, pulled out three balls, and flung them in. “That way, you jam the new tenants with whatever insane price is currently being dictated by,” Pug made a jerk-off motion with his free hand, “the market.”

He snatched the remaining solid and held it, showcasing the pristine, empty rack left behind.

“This is the dream,” he dropped the ball back in, alone. “But, usually, this is the reality. There’s that one tenant still hanging on, some batty old bitty who’s settled in and not going nowhere. Unless...”

“Unless you find a way to get rid of them,” April dragged, ashed, pointed to the lone solid in the triangle.



BY BENJAMIN FIFE.

“And how do you do that?” Pug asked.

“Can offer incentives, a buyout,” April said. “Some dick landlords make it uninhabitable, just force them out through sheer noise. Hear a few stories a week now about those types of shitheads.”

“Sure, make a ruckus during a,” hovering from Pug’s fingertips, the thickest damn air quotes you’ve ever seen, “‘building upgrade’ that seems to consist of nothing but hammering nails into the roof eighteen hours a day,” Pug said. “But even though it’s happening every day, there are laws against that. And remember, you’re smart. Those cases get exposed, and while the former tenant’s fucked no matter the case result, you’d still have extra fines to pay, and there goes some of your profits.”

April rested into her seat among the scattered piles of court papers, ashed her cigarette again into a metal tray in the armrest. “So you try to evict them otherwise, depending on what’s in the lease,” she said.

“Yeah you comb that lease, alright, seeing if they partook in any actions that would’ve broken the agreement, and then kick their asses out,” Pug said. “But if you can’t find anything?”

April smoked, stared.

“Then maybe you make it look like they did,” Pug said.

Harriet was the first to put it all together a few nights ago, the two of them cross-legged on her bed, three puffs into a ratty joint they got from Tommy. She twirled him around for a light shoulder massage and sensed the tenseness within.

“Still thinking about that Lydia Grace thing, huh,” she asked.

He nodded.

“Okay, let’s solve this shit, then,” she said.

She spun him back around, told him to close his eyes, take a breath, think up another name. Whatever first trickled into his mind. He didn’t say the first, and also held in Sam’s, but then came the name William Coletti.

“We’ve gone down that road already,” she said, and rolled the fleshy pads of her fingers against his temples. “One more.”

Pug shut his eyes, and in Harriet’s cramped bedroom that was now somehow theirs, he breathed in the incense that she’d lit and in his mind he followed its sinuous tail to the candle that perched on the second story windowsill, where the flickering flame gave spastic life to the exposed dark wood still living

beneath the puzzle-piece chips that'd been torn from the light blue wall paint, each little scuff some memento or notch left over by a previous occupant. And then his floating point-of-view cascaded from that glowing dance of renters past into the thicket of midnight fog that'd laid claim to the Bay Area entire, and, carried within that mist, as if each hovering droplet was a gossipy repeater in a mystic game of telephone, Pug heard the hollow and distant whine of the final BART train of that night. It silenced as it entered the subterranean once more, and in its vacancy rose again the constant, simmering whir of lone cars coming down the bridge, up through the maze, from wherever they'd been in the city, to wherever in town they called home.

Pug plucked opened his eyes.

"Airbnb," he mouthed. "Air-motherfucking-B-N-B."

They looked up Royce's mom online, and the first dozen or so hits were reviews on AirBnb, VRBO, other awkwardly stitched-together names in the burgeoning field of rent-a-room middlemen marketed as disruption. Each listed Lydia Grace with dozens of high ratings for her lovely accommodations, similarly worded tales about the amenities she offered, the style of bed, the way she called everyone "honey."

"Royce said his mom wouldn't know how to turn on a computer, let alone sublet her place with one," Pug said.

"Ten bucks there's a clause in her lease negating it all if she sublet without permission," Harriet took another hit, sputtered out a rattling cough, "every lease has that bullshit buried somewhere."

"Fake fucking accounts," Pug told April, back in the Ruby Room's smokers lounge, the opening beats of that night's DJ set now thumping against the glass partition.

"The kids at Coletti's Crew, that computer farm I showed you, those names on the white board?" he said. "They're opening up fake accounts, writing up reviews so it looks like a lease infraction, kicking them out, refreshing the rent on the room with the new tenant."

April's first three fingers rattled the chair's arm with the pater of heavy raindrops.

"And check this too," Pug said.

He rested on the table, and the room's overhead light ducked behind his bald head's now perfectly crisp eclipsed outline.

"I looked up the records of the four-plex where Lydia Grace lived. The landlord after that Mr. Gardner who Royce slugged in the face?" He grabbed the diamond-shaped wooden rack and dangled it from his hand. "Guess who?"

The amber of her cigarette glowed a cracking, hot orange and tilted upward as her mouth tightened into a smile.

"William Coletti."

"Through a few subsidiaries," Pug nodded, "but yeah."

April stubbed her smoke and began to shuffle the pages around her back into order.

"It's shaky as hell, Pug," she said. "Especially coming from you, who was linked to his goddamn shooting. We'd need a few more former renters on board before even considering anything."

"We're getting them," Pug said. "Already found three."

She squeezed the paper edges so they sat in perfect stacks.

"Then we're talking class action," she said. "Then we're talking a big fucking deal."

"So, what's next?" Pug said, finally smiling.

"What's next is you go get me a fucking whiskey," April said, depositing the stacks into her leather rolling case. "We got a night ahead of us."

Pug dropped the rack onto the felt and ran his hand in a swiping, victorious arc on his way out. He entered the main bar and wove through the hipsters ironically shrugging on the dance floor, and then back to Emily.

"Two beers, two whiskeys, one martini," Pug called out.

"On it," she got to work.

"On me, Em," Pug heard, and scanned the lineup of sloppy suits on their first last drink of the night. And among them was Frank, holding up a fifty.

"Shit," Pug muttered, and then to Emily. "It's okay, I pay for my own. I have enough gigs."

Frank stood off his stool, set the fifty down on the bar, and rapped his knuckles against it.

"We both know you don't," he said. "It's on me," he told Emily.

"Fuck it, if you got some shit between y'all, keep it between y'all," Emily shrugged, and snatched up the fifty. In its place, she set down the drinks, and Frank made his way to Pug.

"Heard you were here," Frank said. "Had to see you. Hated how all that shit went down with Sam."

"I know," Pug said, took a seat. "I know that, man."

They traded weighty silences, and Frank again apologized for the event, not yet far enough in time's rearview to be haze on the horizon, but getting there. Pug nodded in acceptance.

"I know you can't go into it, especially with me," Pug said. "You did what you could in your limited role, and that's all we can ask." He threw back the whiskey, chased it with beer. "But that don't mean things are ever gonna be right."

"I know," Frank said.

The two sat for some time, cocooned from the surrounding bar cacophony with the pulsing thuds in their temples. Frank reached into his jacket pocket.

"Need a smoke," he said. "Want one?"

"Alright," Pug said.

He turned to the smokers' back room with April's drinks balanced in his hands.

"Nah," Frank said, and hooked his finger in the crook of Pug's inside elbow. "Hate it in there. Feels like a coffin. Let's go out front."

Frank sidled through the crowd and out the front door. Pug set down the drinks, balanced some coasters atop their rims, and followed behind.

Into the crisp Oakland night, Pug heard the rolling flick as Frank tried and failed to spark a light. Behind him, a man lingered, hesitantly checking his phone.

"Damn thing," Frank said through the cigarette hanging from his lip, and again came that flit-flit-flit of his feckless Bic.

The nervous man behind Frank glared at Pug, then back to his phone. Something was off about him. Pug subtly cocked an arm and tightened his fist.

Flit-flit-flit.

The mystery man put his phone away and turned to face them. He contorted into a pained wince, then a fake smile, and Pug brought his foot to steady himself into a defensive stance. As he did, he struck a firm object behind him. He turned, and saw a squat woman in a jean jacket with curly hair set on her head like debris corralled in a vacuum bag.

"Look out, asshole," she groaned to Pug, and maintained her course to the mystery man. "You Jeff?"

"I am," Jeff extended his open hand.

“I’m a hugger,” the woman said, and enveloped the date.
Flit-flit-flit.

Whoosh.

Frank finally coerced the flame. He awkwardly waved it across the tip of the cigarette like some aborted black magic rite.

Pug examined Frank’s face, now spastically lit in the roving orange halo of his unsteady flame. Something approaching fear was in his eyes, and Pug now realized that the cause of Frank’s blundering coordination was that his old friend wasn’t looking at the lighter, but rather, at whatever was over Pug’s shoulder.

And at that moment, before he could turn around, Pug felt a cold grip collapse on the back of his neck, its powerful fingers already dug into his throat to close off any attempt at a scream.



BY JESSICA WASSIL.

Chapter Thirty-Two

THE SUDDEN CHILL on the back of his neck made Pug shiver a moment, before the instinctive flush of impending danger rose and evened his temperature.

“Thought you and I’d be done by now,” Pug heard that crackling voice of Hamilton’s, soon confirmed by the staggering shuffle on the city sidewalk behind him. “You’re like one of those weeds on the lawn that keep popping up, no matter how many times you’ve been uprooted.”

“Wouldn’t know anything about that, my landlord has someone do our maintenance,” Pug said. “You know, loud-ass leaf blower kicking dust back and forth rattling your brain enough that you can’t even take a peaceful morning shit.”

“He’s right,” Spike said from behind him, “those things suck ass.”

Pug tried to shift his head to see them, but Spike’s meaty hand held his neck firmly in place. The brute then pulsed a squeeze that pinched a point and somehow made Pug’s ears ring.

“No need to be examining anything but what’s right ahead of you now,” Spike said. “Just keep looking at your friend there.”

Pug eyed Frank, who pulled from his cigarette as he looked at his feet, then huffed an uneasy sputter of smoke into the night.

“Coward,” Pug spit.

“Man’s just doing his job,” Hamilton’s voice again, and then the wrinkly suited man himself limped into Pug’s view. “Same as any of us.”

“He could’ve done it differently,” Pug said, and felt another ear-piercing pulse jab the back of his neck.

“Be that as it may,” Hamilton folded his hands like a contemplative pastor presiding over a penitent flock. “We’re here, now, and that’s where we are.”

Hamilton turned to Frank.

“I believe there’s another someone inside that needs addressing, too,” he nodded to the red lights spilling from the doors of the Ruby Room. “That’s your duty as well, officer.”

Frank nodded, slowly at first, then in quicker gyrations, as if psyching himself up for the act to come. He dropped his nearly-full cigarette on the sidewalk, stubbed it out with a twist of his shoe, and began to walk back inside.

“Wait, wait, no need,” Pug reached into his pocket, but another piercing neck pulse ceased his movement. “Damn, man, lemme get something.”

Hamilton nodded to Spike behind him, and Pug felt the vice grip subtly loosen. He retrieved his phone, and held it aloft with thumb and forefinger like it was soiled refuse.

“She barely knows anything,” Pug said, “certainly wouldn’t act on it without the proof that’s on this phone, and only this phone.”

Hamilton extended his sinewy fingers, pure white like skeleton bones, and wrapped the pale tentacles around the phone, retrieving it with the shameless ease of a monarch choosing his dinner.

“I’m not gonna tell you how to run whatever it is you run,” Pug huffed, “but maybe putting the squeeze on a public defender isn’t the best course to take when you don’t need to.”

Hamilton cycled through the phone, his cold eyes lit by the screen’s glow, processing it with algorithmic precision. He flicked it off and pressed thumb and forefinger to nose’s bridge, clamped his eyes, sucked in a deep breath through his nostrils, and slid it into his pocket.

“Officer, you’re relieved,” Hamilton spoke through the side of his mouth to Frank. “Thank you for your service and all that.”

Frank hesitated.

“Leave,” Hamilton said, and Frank took off at a steady, quickened pace up the sidewalk.

They all followed his movements to the end of the block and then he turned out of sight. Hamilton nodded to Spike, who shifted his grip so as to better steer Pug down 14th Street away from the bar.

“I can sympathize with your position, anyone surely can,” Hamilton said. “But that doesn’t mean I can neglect my own duties.”

“Where we gonna go?” Pug asked.

“The man wants a word,” Hamilton said. “You’ve caused quite a ruckus that requires further examination.”

Their stumbling footfalls shuffled against the concrete, and another flush rose through Pug’s face. He closed his eyes, and in that moment, a cramped, wood-laden warehouse came into his mind: barred windows, a confusing staircase dismantled, nowhere to outrun the approaching fire as smoke filled and suffocated the lungs.

And then, echoing against the brick walls of the downtown buildings, Pug heard something else: A faint rumble, and then the rusty creaks of a critical mass approaching. He opened his eyes, and saw flashing whites and blues and reds and purples and oranges reflect from the first floor windows at 14th and Lakeside, and he heard the industrial chorus of shifting gears and hoots and hollers descending upon them.

“You’ve run out of options,” Pug heard Hamilton say, and then, taking his town’s cue, he thrust an elbow back behind him, somewhere into Spike’s gut, and the grip around his neck momentarily tightened, then disappeared. Pug shook off his captors and sprinted across the street. He turned around and they stood and glared, more annoyed than angry.

“Gonna have us a chase, then?” Hamilton said, and took a first step off the curb into the street.

But before he took his second, Spike wrapped an arm around and reeled him back up on the sidewalk, a half-second before a wall of bicycles descended onto the street, reclaiming the space from the entire concept of automobile usage itself.

The motley legion, hundreds in number, blurred in streaming lights and obscure sounds, clad in costuming solely each’s

own, purloined from thrift shops or hand-me-downs from relatives past, helmets sporadic but in neon when adorned, one in a crusted and bedazzled wedding veil, one in tight jeans accentuated with such gemstones and earned torn lines that when they danced in the swift cycling motion the entire ensemble blurred into a colorful fullness, but within Pug's unfocused eyes they all coalesced into a single form of wheels and silver frames, a fleshy stream in command above.

"Hey, yo, Pug!" he heard shout from the mass, and a bike exited the slipstream to squeak a stop in front of him.

It was Eli, white dude who worked the door at Heart and Dagger on the weekends and caught a few loose shifts at the Missouri Lounge now and then. Mostly knew him from warehouse shows around town, always with those thick black mutton chops like Lemmy from Motörhead. Pug never saw him in any bands, but whenever Eli tied his jean jacket in a knot around his waist, everyone knew that the mosh pit had been officially opened.

"Waddup, Eli?" Pug huffed out, and looked through the blur of metal and lights. Hamilton stood in his wrinkled suit with a smirk on his face, Spike aimed hatred that focused with each nostril flare. "Can I catch a lift? But, quick. Like, right fucking now."

"Hop on, brother," Eli said. Pug stepped one-two onto his bike's back pegs and grabbed Eli's shoulders to steady, who then said, "Sounds like you don't care where we're fucking going, but it can't be fucking here."

"Seems about right," Pug said.

Eli lurched his bicycle forward with the new weight, and found momentum enough to merge into the roving bike party of second Fridays. A gal two bikes over had long pink dreads that hung over her shoulders, and behind her was Omar as always with a trailer carrying a blown-own speaker blasting hypnotic house music cranked to distortion.

"Got some bad guys after you?" Eli screamed over his shoulder.

"I do," Pug said.

Eli shot out a laugh.

"Figured as much, my man," Eli said. "We gotta get your house in order one of these days."

They rode up 14th past the static white of the McDonald's

lights, then the hollering crowd outside of the sports bar whooping between their drags of smokes.

Pug craned his neck back to locate Spike and Hamilton, but they were obscured by the mass' tail end. He turned back forward, and Pug watched a bald man draped in a rug shuffle into the triangular alcove of some closed business for a quick breath before continuing his endless shuffle to wherever he was going. Two aggro cyclists in the mass stop-lit traffic on Broadway, and Eli pedaled past an old crew huddled at the Frank Ogawa bus stop, and then through those ethereal lights coming down from City Hall.

"Any way I can help?" Eli screamed over his shoulder again.

"Keep riding is all," Pug said.

The party turned left at the burrito joint, and the row of late-night eaters smiled and slammed their open hands against the second floor glass. Another left, and the pack steered back into downtown's wind tunnel to cascade up Broadway, past an old lady pushing a shopping cart jammed with metal and clothes, past lingering trios just taking in the night air. A slight left at Latham Square put the riders on Telegraph, past Café Van Kleef, and the new art galleries and renovated cocktail bars where \$10 wouldn't get you much of anything anymore. Then into the milling crowds on the sidewalks, coming from as far as Tracy for the weekend. They cheered or gawked or both at the passing horde.

The group rode into the shining brights of the Fox Theater, where the exiting crowd spilled from under the marquee and into the row of Ubers and Lyfts double- and triple-parked, trying to find their matches.

"Shit show tonight," Eli said.

A woman in a red hat and a cropped bob of curly brown held the crook of her date's elbow. "She is all you could need," Pug heard the woman sing. "She will feed you tomatoes, and radio wires," but her voice drifted off as they turned the other way.

"This'll work," Pug said and tapped Eli's shoulder, and his driver pulled over. Pug hopped off.

"Well, good luck, man," Eli said. "See you around," and back into the flow he merged, the mass easily moving through Telegraph's stalled traffic, then a left west to someplace unknown.

Pug melted into the concert crowd as they hiked the block

toward the BART station, swiveling around for any sign of Hamilton or Spike, thankfully seeing neither. He dipped into the subterranean of the blue-bricked station, tagging his card as he passed through the turnstile. It didn't register, so he tried it again, and then just hopped over entirely. He lifted his sweatshirt hood up over his bald head, and blended in with the concert-attendees as they all waited for the next train. When the whoosh came down the tunnel, he rocked in anticipation, and when the doors slid open, he ducked in and grabbed a window seat.

Pug rested his head against the cool glass and considered this now-deeper shit he was in.

With Frank involved, the calculus had changed. His address was only the speed of an OPD system search away, so that was out as a destination. And his pursuers certainly had eyes at his usual bars, maybe even the warehouses now, he couldn't be sure.

The train rose from the underground into the night air as if ejected from the womb, and Pug saw the loose traffic on the 24 from his newly elevated position. He looked west, and somehow in the misty dark of the night he could make out the construction cranes clear across the bay, in that city, out where they say nothing good ever happens, no sir they don't.

But that was the only option, Pug thought. Nowhere left on this side for him to hide.

A loud creak rose with the train's slow-then-stop at the MacArthur station, and Pug swerved through the open door, down the stairs, across the station, and back upstairs for the connecting train heading back into San Francisco. He slid between the closing doors and took another seat.

The train sped back under downtown Oakland, and hooked a right back up and outside. On his left, Pug saw the futuristically drab metallic block of the data center, a broad banner proclaiming "Hella Connected," and then he saw the rowed white cranes of the harbor, guarding sentries as ever. The train slid to a screeching halt at the station. The doors whirred open.

"West Oakland, West Oakland," the conductor said through the intercom. "Last stop before San Francisco."

Pug steeled himself, second- and third-guessed, and then just stayed still as the doors closed.

The train left the station, last one in Oakland before the city,

and it gained speed as it crossed the bay underwater. Out the window, only the black of the long tunnel, the occasional orange light marking an emergency exit if the worst case were to occur. Pug yawned to pop his ears twice, and soon the white lights of the Embarcadero station flooded his eyes.

And then, overtaking the whites, Pug saw flashing reds and blues through the window coming from somewhere, he couldn't figure out where. He sunk into his seat, and then, of course, of fucking course, there was that goddamn Spike bounding down the station stairs. He scurried off to the train's front car.

Pug lifted his hood even further and sunk into his seat, and then saw Hamilton descend from the escalator with an utmost professionalism and the confidence of class. He removed his hand from the escalator rail, wiped it with a clean tissue, and without further pause, limped directly toward Pug's car. Pug sunk deeper into his plastic blue seat.

"Next stop Montgomery," said the conductor, and the car's doors whirred shut.

Pug lifted himself back up with hesitant ease, but directly outside his window, leering and staring, stood Hamilton and a sweaty, heaving Spike next to him.

They both smiled.

"We apologize for the delay," the conductor said, and the car doors whirred back open.



BY JEN WEISBERG.

Chapter Thirty-Three

THE ELEVATOR'S ENGINE SMOOTHLY WHIRRED to life, and gravity momentarily fought against Pug's ascending body before giving up and letting the machine take his battered husk skyward.

His swollen-shut eyes more felt than saw the ivory white bars from the hallway lights rush past as they rose floor after floor. He sucked in breath through the slits in his bulbous, shattered nose, and it made a faint whistle. His face looked like pulverized raw meat in some Eritrean dish, and Pug tasted iron from the micro-cuts inside his cheeks.

The ride back home across the new bridge was foggy in his memory. Spike had responded to every one of Pug's snarky comments with a sharp fist to his face or stomach, as if that'd actually get our hero to shut the fuck up. When the inadequacy of that tactic was fully realized, Spike jabbed his blows into Pug's weak arm, and the bolts keeping it all together loosened enough so the bone hung awkwardly again. But still, those tactics didn't take either.

After the sedan parked down in the underground lot of whichever tall apartment building they'd ended up at, Spike yanked Pug out from the backseat by his armpits and set his legs

into a resting stance. Hamilton called for the elevator, and the three entered its sodium glow and headed up.

Midway through the ascension, Pug felt his right eye descend back into his skull. His blurry left eye quickly followed, and a hot, red flush sprinkled up his face. He slumped to the floor.

“Get his ass up,” Hamilton said, and Spike’s massive palms again nestled into Pug’s armpits. “May have shook that cage a little more than we’d hoped.”

Pug blinked open the inflamed tissues around his eyes. His swirling headache was amplified as his fractured vision came back into focus. He was forced to his feet.

The elevator slowed to a gentle, precise stop. Hamilton stepped to the panel, and his fingers ran across them with a magician’s practiced dexterity. The doors swished open to the pure white of the floor’s lobby. Pug squinted through the harsh glow.

A blue insignia too blurry to decipher hung on the wall. Coming from somewhere unknown, the gurgling sound of a running fountain. He felt his body lift off the ground, and the toes of his black-and-white sneakers scuffed across the freshly-buffed wooden floor. They paused outside a set of oak double doors that slowly crept inward and opened to an expansive, auburn interior.

Deep within the room, Pug saw a hovering white-out spotlight. It expanded and brightened as his aided journey continued. Within the white was the bulbous shape of a man’s upper half. This man signed papers with graceful strokes of a pen, lifted them into the nearby metal bin with a soft shuffling sound, and returned back to sign another round.

“Big enough place for ya?” Pug slurred, and he eyed a wry smile on the man’s face.

“Shut the fuck up,” Spike spit, as he set Pug gingerly in a mahogany chair set across from the lit desk. “Don’t make me do more than I need to,” Spike whispered, and Pug felt a comradely one-two squeeze on his biceps.

The man signed one last page, set it atop the rising out-bin stack, and reached behind his ears.

One at a time, he untucked the wire arms of his glasses frames, pulled them off, folded them closed, and set them down with the thudding heft that comes with expense.

He examined Pug.

The man's head was completely shorn, like Pug's, but growing the faint fuzz of a newborn's first growth. His mouth was contorted into a tight, awkward smirk, but there was something familiar about his eyes.

"Christ," the man said, "your face is a mess, boy."

That voice dislodged where Pug had seen the face before, or at least what that face once was: Fairyland.

The real estate man himself.

William Coletti.

"Been worse," Pug slurred through his jaw. "Used to go to the Stork Club every Friday night."

"Is that a reference you believe I should know?" the man said incredulously, and turned to Hamilton.

"Beats the fuck out of me," Hamilton said.

"It's a punk club on Telegraph," Spike grunted out. "Lots of fights, lots of moshing, lots of shit."

Coletti glared for a silent moment, and Pug felt Spike shuffle his feet microscopically backwards. Coletti turned back to our seated, beaten Pug.

"Anyway, not long left to go now," Coletti said. "You're gonna die tonight. But surely you've figured that out."

Coletti pressed his hands against the desk with enough force that white patches formed around his knuckles. He pushed himself into an aching stand, sucked in a pained breath through his nose, and slowly circled around so there was nothing but air between himself and Pug.

"Can you stand?" the man asked.

Pug nodded.

"C'mere, then," Coletti shifted his head in a tilt of coy beckoning. "Let me show you something."

Coletti grabbed his stomach as if holding in ruptured viscera and started to walk from the desk spotlight into the darkness of the expansive room. His bare feet left deep imprints on the red rug path that'd been carefully laid out on the hardwood.

Pug spent the minute-plus examining Coletti's immense bookshelf, filled with hardcover tomes of old maps and the diaries of conquistadors, and then Pug viewed the hand-woven rugs of indigenous design that hung from his walls. In the corner, a stacked display of Ohlone mortars and pestles. Resting against

one wall was a massive, framed poster advertising a museum exhibit on Oakland hip hop, bold letters proclaiming the exhibit's sponsorship by The Coletti Foundation.

When Coletti finally reached the sliding glass door, he heard Spike growl, "get the fuck up," so he did. Pug held his re-broken arm close to his chest to keep it from bouncing and followed the red carpet to the balcony.

"Don't move as fast as I did, but I'll recuperate enough," Coletti said when Pug got outside. "Anyway, it's not movement of the physical that's important anyhow."

Coletti rested his elbows on the balcony's iron railing and nodded to the slumbering town. Light from rooms occupied by night owls made the rolling fog glow like some makeshift specter in an old silent reel.

"Tell me what you see," he said.

Pug looked out.

The smoky mist in the hills obscured the million dollar homes, but he could still see the top of the tree line catching air on the ridge.

A distant police chopper, its spotlight off, quietly headed back to base. Sprawling flats filled by stand-alone homes and apartment buildings. Deep in the distant horizon, Pug saw the strand of white headlights flowing across the bridge from the city.

"I see Oakland," Pug said.

"But," Coletti pressed, "what do you see?"

Pug looked again.

Even from that high up, with the wind whipping past strong enough to force a squint, he could make out the string of bulbs spun around the town's heart-shaped lake. They reflected on the water's surface in a perfectly-focused halo, save occasional blurred spots from the windstruck ripples. Faraway, the screech of the BART and the chronic orange haze from the security lighting at the pockets of new construction. To the east, squealing tires from that night's sideshow.

"Oakland, man," Pug said. "Same as ever."

"It's frozen, waiting to be thawed," Coletti painfully presented the panorama with a swipe of his arm. He grinned at Pug, and his face was given an ethereal veil as wisps of fog rode afrent the moonlight.

“You’re a renter, aren’t you,” Coletti said. “So, you’re a person without rights. You’re a stateless character without sovereignty, one beholden to market changes beyond your control.”

Pug pivoted his elbows and looked to Oakland again, and Coletti followed his gaze.

“I came here during dot-com one,” Coletti said. “When I landed, the future of investment clarified. Not in tech, not in apps. In land. You all weren’t ready for it, with only that puny peninsula over there. And on this end, only the usable flats between the bay and the hills, no one seeing the necessity to build more, the knowledge that the future was invading.”

Coletti withdrew a black cylindrical object from his jacket front pocket and put it in his mouth. He pulled on it, and a neon blue light activated on the end. He exhaled a light gray mist that unraveled in the night air.

“I’d offer a cigarette, but I quit,” Coletti said, still holding his vape pen aloft.

“Bad habit,” Pug said. “Was thinking it’d be the thing that killed me eventually.”

Coletti smirked.

“See Pug, workers follow the money, same as ever. It’s baked into the system,” Coletti said. “When the world’s money came to the Bay, so did an invasion.” He waved his vape to illustrate his points. “The crash that came in oh-eight and oh-nine, that was the shift. Shit loans had already come for those without real capital, which Oakland had no shortage of, and so they had no financial shield when the introductory rates ended and they couldn’t make the payments anymore. The banks cleared them out like overgrown vines, and we claimed the space.”

Coletti dragged again, and the faux amber glowed blue and slept.

“It was a free for all. We collected what we could. We jacked up their rents to fit in with our definition of market rate, and if they couldn’t make the payments, we excised them for someone who could. If they were rent controlled, we made their places unlivable with renovations or neglect, until they couldn’t take it any longer. We used those profits to go after other buildings. We bought out landlords, and if they didn’t take our money, we bought out the landlords across the street and showed them what they were missing. Eventually, everyone gets sick of neighbors

getting rich while they stay poor.”

Coletti pulled one last drag and put the pen back into his pocket.

“Meanwhile, the old Californians who thought getting here first gave them indefinite dibs fought against any new housing going up, truly the great hypocrisy of the hippie class. All that did was jack up the value of the ones we owned. Fine with us. Eventually, their opposition showed, a bunch of transplanted techies with progressive ideals who’d fight city laws on the behalves, purposefully or otherwise, of people like myself, all to stick it to those dirty hippies by building higher apartments to block their views. Which we’d do. Happily. Of course. It gives us more rents, which gives us more money. It’s literally our business.”

He turned back to Pug, and the fog obscuring the moon dissipated.

“Housing is the perfect venture, there’s absolutely none better,” Coletti said. “People need a place to put their stuff, to store their food, to fuck, to shit, to sleep. But the laws don’t consider these basic essentials, despite it being obvious to a preschooler. Imagine a society not guaranteeing a blatant need, and then imagine the money to be made off of that gap.”

“So, where does Lydia Grace fit into all of this?” Pug asked.

“Who?”

“That old lady you evicted,” Pug said. “The one who’d been there forever. The one that got pushed out after your team of tech kids wrote those fake reviews. The whole goddamn conspiracy that Sam uncovered, why you wanted him dead.”

“Oh, that,” Coletti said with a knowing nod. “One of Hamilton’s pet projects. I can’t speak much on it, really. He’s always looking for that leg up in the race, and I give him some extra capital to do what he pleases. Now and then, maybe he shoots his arrow a tad too far, but it’s all low-hanging fruit, anyway. Pick it or it rots on the vine. There’s ample bounty without, but it’s good to expedite the inevitable sometimes.”

“We almost done here?” Pug said, trying to roll his eyes through the pain of his broken face. “I got places to die.”

“So then, Pug,” Coletti again presented the view, “what do you see in Oakland now?”

Pug looked, and in that speck of a moment, Pug’s awareness

cohered and it revealed an exit that had been hidden before.

I helped where I could, highlighting a railing here, a landing space there, but any connections made between his thoughts and whatever you'd call me, well, that's beyond my direct control, largely dependent on seeds planted generations before. It's too complicated to get into here.

All of which to say, at that moment in time, for a wide variety of reasons both concrete and metaphysical, our guy Pug balled his left hand into a fist and hammered Coletti in the back of his head.

The man pitched forward and his face struck the rail. The chalky cough of shattered teeth puffed in the air as he stumbled to his side. Coletti put a hand to his closed mouth, which bloody parentheses had already encircled. With his other hand, he snap-snap-snapped his fingers into the open door, and Pug heard the shuffle of footsteps from inside.

Pug grabbed onto the railing with his good arm, climbed over, and bent his knees into a balance. There was a five-foot gap between Coletti's balcony and the next one over. Pug took a steadying breath, but then felt a muscular hand grip his shoulder, so he said fuck it and jumped.

His shins came down hard against the railing with a sharp pain, but his knees cleared the top, so his body fell forward. Behind him, Hamilton and Spike tended to Coletti.

"Not getting as far as you think," Coletti slurred, as he was helped to his feet. Hamilton and Spike stumbled back inside to give chase.

Pug rapped his knuckles against the apartment window, but the still curtains showed no moment behind them.

He stepped over this new railing, squatted down, and dangled his legs over the edge. He grabbed onto the vertical bar with his good arm and gently lowered himself, swinging back and forth once, twice for momentum. He sucked in breath as he let go and fell onto the balcony one floor down.

"Jesus," he muttered.

Another dark window, another still curtain.

Another few knuckle-raps gone unanswered.

Pug continued vaulting and lowering. He looked up and saw the crescent of Coletti's face peering through slots in the balconies, shouting directions into a phone.

Pug ran to the edge of this fourth-floor balcony, scurried over the side, squatted to dangle his legs down, and then he felt a hand clasp around his ankle.

He kicked it loose and pulled himself back over the balcony. He peered below, and Spike's bald head was staring back.

Pug knocked on the apartment's glass door, and felt it shift slightly. He palmed the window, and it slid open easily.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness of the empty room. White carpeting. A stationary island of drawers on the square of tile that designated a kitchen area. A closet hutch near the door, its metal rail empty save three wire hangers.

Pug strode to the pale horizontal sliver on the carpet that cast light from beyond the apartment's front door. He turned the knob and walked into the bright hallway. A scarlet carpet ran the length of the floor, its color reflected in the fire extinguisher cases that hung against the cottage-cheese walls. They looked like hovering alarm bells.

He knocked on the next apartment door, no response. And then the next one.

Same. And the next.

"Help," Pug whispered through edge of each door. "Help me," he spoke fully. And then in a scream.

"Help!"

Footsteps stamped on the floor above, and then the harsh, stinging ding as the elevator arrived. He pounded on the closest door. No answer. The elevator doors swished open, and on instinct, Pug twisted the doorknob. It opened up into another apartment's new darkness.

Another apartment. White carpet, a square of tile to designate the kitchen, a dark shadow indicating a bathroom.

Empty.

He ran to the tile and searched the lower cabinets for a hiding space, maybe a knife.

"Milo!" Coletti screamed, his booming voice echoing in the hallway. "There's nowhere to hide. Haven't you figured it out? This whole damn place is mine."

Pug stood, and with careful urgency tiptoed to the balcony. He whisked open the white curtain, and there was Spike, a blocky stoicism to his face. Pug heard the door to the empty apartment creak open. He turned to face it.

“This is Oakland’s other hidden secret,” Coletti said, a thin silhouette in the hallway’s washout white. “There’s plenty of space here for everyone. We just don’t want to give it up.”



BY TIFFANY SILVER-BRAUN

Chapter Thirty-Four

THE IDLING SEDAN'S HEAD BEAMS captured Pug and Spike in their dual cones, then clicked off and pitched them into the slumbering fog of a moonless night on that unused metal bridge.

The old eastern span.

A roving gust scented like the sea funneled up through the openings between the trusses. The wind rippled the clear plastic sheets that hid that ghastly, wrenching dismantling equipment.

Spike prodded Pug's shoulder, and they began their long westward walk.

The mist on their path amplified the repetitive ding-ding-ding from the sedan's cabin, until Hamilton twisted loose the key and slammed the car door shut. He hobbled to catch up, and, when he reached them, took time to catch his breath before finally speaking.

"In a sense, we're walking on an extension of that great trans-continental railroad," Hamilton explained like a tour guide, his voice crisp in the still night. "Only reason this ever got built was that the train ended here," he pulled a thumb back over his shoulder, "and the rich folks were over there."

He aimed a finger-gun at the peninsular cityscape past Yerba

Buena island, and took a casual aim.

He fired.

“But this, this, this,” he stomped his foot, and his loafer heel rattled sharp notes in the cavernous, damp miasma. “It’s just a siphon, sucking out gold.”

Pug swallowed hard, his face flushed with fear. In his ears, his pounding pulse throbbed. He heard a lone car horn blaring from the other bridge, the new eastern span, but its note grew fainter as it continued west at this late hour. When it dimmed to nothing, that new bridge fell silent too.

“This walk we’re on,” Hamilton said, and a funnel of mist from his mouth blew forward, “it’ll end soon enough. That may not bring you much solace, and neither will telling you that it’s ultimately not my call to put you on this path. And if I was the man choosing the choices, we wouldn’t be ending this way. But such are the rights of ownership.”

Pug’s feet slowed, and he drifted back into Spike’s hard body, who shoved him further ahead. Pug stumbled and fell onto the road. His hands scraped against the asphalt, and he stared at the lane lines that’d been chipped and faded years ago.

“No need to make it rough like that,” Hamilton said to Spike. He slowly limped forward and bent ever so slightly to offer Pug a hand. “We have all night for this.”

“Sorry,” Spike said.

Pug twisted himself up on an elbow, glared at Hamilton’s open hand, and spat at it.

“That’s fair,” Hamilton said, and took out a silk handkerchief to wipe off his hand. He then withdrew a small bottle of clear sanitizer gel from his pocket, doused his hands with it, wiped them off, and then offered his freshened hand again.

“We don’t have to do this,” Pug said. “I can go. I can leave the town.”

“Hell, I know that, and Spike may know that too, depending on what he knows about any of this,” Hamilton said, standing back up straight. “But the boss wants what the boss wants, and that’s why he’s the boss.”

He nodded to Spike, who took the direction and gathered Pug in his arms. He stood Pug back up from the pavement as if our hero was some hollow statue and backed away. Hamilton approached.

“The problem with Coletti, if you ask me, and you likely wouldn’t, your mind being preoccupied as is, with your approaching death and all, the problem with Coletti is that he’s too tunnel-visioned,” Hamilton said. “Housing’s fine, but not the only way to make a buck, not even the best. Will he move on when the market normalizes? Remains to be seen. My gut says that he doesn’t have the adaptability, not like myself. But his capital plays now, here at least, and that’s what matters.”

Hamilton paused and outstretched his hands aloft as if to present the city itself. In the cold air a train whistle blew as it came in to rest, far from its distant destination.

“But what’s the endgame in all of this?” Pug slurred, his beaten face throbbing with the speech. “When do you finally use all those riches you’ve collected? When are you done?”

Hamilton spun and his loose-fitting jacket drifted like a count unfurling his cape.

“That’s the trick of it all,” Hamilton said. “There is no end. The drive feeds itself. That’s how it survives. At its core, the fight has always been against time, and that fight never ends.”

Hamilton’s heels clicked clear against the cement as he approached Pug.

“Look at your situation, or what it once was,” he spoke. “Your record said you once owned a car to get you around, to make deliveries for the rich, and that motion got sucked into the system. Then, it was your bike, your leg muscles themselves, pedaling for the profit of others. Every piece of you, ripped away slowly because you couldn’t afford the safeguards against it. Because the only real way to do so is to make more money than those who can buy you. And friend, they’ve all already got a hell of a head start.”

He spun back around and the trio continued along the old bridge.

“Even me. I’m merely a cog,” Hamilton said. “Spike, too. Truly like you, if only a little higher on the chain.”

Spike shrugged and his leather jacket groaned with the stress.

“Coletti himself even answers to that great higher power, of stress and worry, of never being comfortable, or at least never having enough for his children and their children and theirs,” Hamilton said. “Because it never is enough. It never will be.”

He nodded over the bridge's rail, down to the black water swirled below.

"How much water is enough to guarantee that you'll never go thirsty? I don't mean only for yourself, but for your loved ones, and theirs. And then for those armed guards you'll need to hire to keep the desperately thirsty away from your reservoirs?" he asked. "There's no answer. It's an impossible question."

"That's the bullshit mindset of survivalists, of stockpilers," Pug said. "People that live off the grid in compounds and bunkers, that live irrelevant lives."

"We're all survivalists," Hamilton said. "When there's only one spot on the lifeboat, what will you do?"

"But the ship hasn't crashed, hasn't even left the port," Pug said. "You just need to build a better one. Add more lifeboats."

"If you think there's a way for god's creatures to agree on anything, let alone work for it, I admire your optimism," Hamilton said. "But if anything, tonight should break your belief in such utopian visions."

Silence returned.

Their shoes clicked as they marched, and their footfalls echoed in the fog.

"Getting close now," Hamilton muttered.

Straight ahead, the bridge's path disappeared into blackness. Further, past the wide gulf that split the bridge into two, the void that bisected my soul, Pug saw the shadow of another one of those damn surgical cranes waiting to finish it off.

They walked to the edge, and Pug heard the whispering slosh of the waves below. His knees buckled and he fell to the concrete. Headlights from a car speeding west on the new bridge flashed across Pug's swollen face for a moment before true darkness fell again.

"Let's not make this a whole thing," Hamilton said. And then to Spike, "Get him up."

The brute walked forward, and with his massive arms gathered Pug up like a pile of packing peanuts. Pug wailed a strike across Spike's chest, and the brute shifted his weight slightly at the nuisance then carried Pug to the bridge's edge.

"Don't!" Pug screamed. "You don't need to do this!"

"Yeah, I do," Spike muttered.

"I do," he told himself again.

Pug, whimpering and helpless and sobbing, looked into the darkness for any kind of solace, and in the distance saw twin massive construction cranes in the cityspace. Their yellow arms sparkled in the sodium orange of security lights, and hope left Pug for good.

“Sorry, bud,” Pug heard, and Spike withdrew his arms.

Pug scratched and clawed with survival instinct, but his fingertips caught only leather, and so without words, he fell into the void.

Pins of weightlessness in his stomach rose into a ball of heat as the wind fluttered his eyelids like an envelope caught in a hurricane. The black waves of the bay approached, and he felt his life leave him.

But then in his foreground vision, he saw that his shoe had dislodged. It fell further away, twirling like a shrinking disc. His fall had stopped, somehow, and then he knew how when he felt a horrible sharp pain in his arm like some massive beast had snapped it clear off at the shoulder.

Stars flooded his sight, and a silent shriek pierced his brain as signals from the tearing sinews and muscles in his arm reached their goal. With tear-filled eyes, he saw the waves below crest their flickering flowers of white, and his lost shoe floated for a moment before disappearing into the sea below.

Pug looked up to the queasy shockwave of pain in his arm, and saw a blurred, distant moon behind wisps of fog. He blinked away tears, and saw that his right elbow was contorted in some ghastly shape as it hooked around one of the bridge’s old steel trusses. His body swung from this axis like a plastic action figure hung by a toddler at the edge of a branch.

His momentum shifted and the steel rubbed his forearm raw. Pug’s eyes widened, and he quickly swung his left hand up to grab his right wrist to complete the circuit of limbs between white-knuckled grip and lifeless tube of flesh and bone. His shattered arm screamed, and sweat flushed from his forehead as he squinted through the shock.

He examined his surroundings, and saw another rail below. He dipped his shoeless toe down onto it, and when his sock caught enough of the bar to steady himself, Pug canted horizontally.

The cold sea rippled hundreds of feet below us all.

And then Pug heard a series of raps, one-two-three, on the steel above him. He twisted his neck to look upward, and he saw a dark shadow approaching, crisply silhouetted in the now fogless moonlight.

It was Spike, careful with his footing as he came down to finish the job.

And right then, with the end near for us all, well, that's when I decided it was finally time in this damn story for me to show up.



BY YUNG COCONUT.

Chapter Thirty-Five.

ACCORDING TO THE SEISMIC RECORD, no activity of consequence took place in the early morning hours of April 11th, 2014. But sensors have gaps, data gets lost, science is more hypothesis than law.

Whatever truth existed from that long forgotten rumbling hour is now lost to time.

What's left is the record of rumors and vague questions posted on various social mediums. And the conversations at the Saturday morning farmers' markets recollecting bad dreams. And the nearly imperceptible bump in crime stats and car accidents that hint at a caustic emotional state infecting the geographical region that had had its deep sleep disturbed by some event experienced simultaneously by the masses.

But none of that approaches proof.

Nevertheless, a minor tremor miles from one's bed on the flats of the East Bay does not produce the same force as an epicenter erupting below one's feet. This is particularly notable if those feet are precariously perched upon the steel beams hung far above the bay's black waters.

Weeks later, they skimmed out a body.

It had drifted into the deep gorge of the shipping lane between the peninsula and Yerba Buena Island. It had become caught in a whirlpool under the bridge's intact western span.

The tugboat's captain, who'd taken command of the tanker hauling materials into Silicon Valley, noticed the floater first. It swirled in circles, a torn leather jacket stuck to its rotten shoulder bone. A blackened, sinewy sleeve lagged behind like the tapered tail of a hypnotist's wheel. The captain radioed to the outboard tug.

Said they had another jumper. Said it was caught in the current. Said to go out and get him.

The body went unclaimed at the Alameda coroner's office near the zoo. Months later, it was transported to Stockton for cremation. It was first in the retort that day, when the machine was at its coolest. Grease leaked through the chute into the ash hopper, and black smoke blew from the stacks. Unclaimed shifts at bars around town were parceled out after minor logistical headaches, and the mystery was forgotten by all but a few.

The cranes and drills and blowtorches continued their steady pace during the summer days, separating beams and dislodging bolts that had kept the bridge up for decades. They paused during the weekends as if to stretch out the process.

The bridge's top floor came off first.

Across the gap, cars and trucks curved along the new white bridge without fuss, save newspaper stories portending its own ironic collapse. Commuters who read these warnings didn't fret as they headed into the city. What were the odds, who had the time. But still, they peered left in the gridlocked rush hour, tracking time's passage by how much of the old bridge still remained.

Months later, a Black man was choked to death by police in New York. His body was only the latest, but it was caught on video. Spreading awareness whispered over simmering ambers of unresolved rage. When it happened again in August, this time in Missouri, the sparks ignited, and so began a great conflagration across the country.

It soon caught in Oakland, as anyone local would have

expected. The demonstration began under the starry night at Oscar Grant Plaza in the late summer and spilled out nearby into the hazy orange street lights outside of the police department.

Clad in riot gear and wielding his nightstick, Frank held steady in his line of fellow officers as the crowd yelled insults at them. Said they were pigs and fuckers. Said they should be ashamed.

Frank had been advised to apply a thin strip of black tape across his badge to obscure it from cell phone cameras. Even so, an old friend who'd made the trip downtown knew it was him. He recognized Frank's mustache through his fogged mask.

The old friend didn't say anything. Time wasn't right, and he had nothing to say anyway. The old friend continued pushing his bike up Broadway and nestled himself within the mass.

This roving protesting amoeba carried signs, raised fists, and yelled about the ownership of their streets in the white spotlights shining from the helicopters circling above. They chanted against the walls of the boutique businesses and new wine bars, live-streamed and tweeted, and continued marching up Broadway, the bicyclist among them.

At Latham Square, someone in a mask rammed a dumpster through a store window to hoots of encouragement and angry objections from the older, liberal whites.

Led by no one, they went slightly left onto Telegraph through the gentrifying cocktail bars of Uptown. Windows shattered there too, and the procession continued, their footfalls crunching on the carpet of broken glass.

The bicyclist heard a metallic sound to his left, and watched an East Bay Express stand topple. He collected a loose issue from which he learned, later that week when he examined it, that William Coletti had been removed from his post on the city's housing commission. No further explanation was given.

Weeks after that, a spokesperson for Coletti's Crew announced that its funding had dried up. Said that this year would be its last. Said Mr. Coletti would be focusing his energy on building the new tall apartment buildings that

were needed to fight against market rates. Said it would make the town livable again. Said that rents would come down, that everyone would benefit.

Coletti broke ground on three new developments within the year. Zero percent of the units were labeled as “affordable.”

But that all came later.

Before, once again up Telegraph amidst the protesting crowd, our bicyclist pushed the ten-speed he’d bought secondhand online.

He was silent. He watched. Listened.

The night infiltrated his sweatshirt and thermodynamically diffused into the metal rod that still steadied his shattered arm. He itched the spot, but forgot about it as the group marched on.

They passed the brick SROs across from the beer gardens. Smiling faces leaned out of their open windows at the cacophony. A sweaty old man in a torn white t-shirt entered from a side street, pushing in front of him a stereo system on wheels. It gave the whole thing a beat. Police cruisers bracketed with flashing blues and reds and sped past to block off 27th, to keep the crowd off the highway. To maintain the flow of traffic, the flow of capital.

The march continued north, and the bicyclist saw a crowd of social-only smokers outside of Commonwealth. He waved to those he knew, and they nodded back, but they stayed within their circle and retreated inside once the march had moved on.

They reached the highway interchange where dual tent encampments had sprouted on the sidewalks. Residents crept from their tents with smiles and applause. They raised their fists under the black graffiti on the side of the overpass. It was tagged “OHLONE LAND.”

The bicyclist phoned his partner for plans to meet later on that night. Another masked participant smashed the window of a paint shop, and others invaded. They retrieved cans of white paint and spilled them onto the asphalt at Telegraph and 42nd.

Those stains would remain for years. Maybe remnants live even now.

The crowd continued its advance, past the old diving shop, past the combination KFC and Taco Bell, past the ancient queer bar, to the Oakland and Berkeley border where the green street signs give way to those of dirt brown.

In the foggy distance, the university's campanile chimed in the new hour.

Police followed on the streets and in the sky, and a covert plan spread throughout the improvised huddle to take the highway. They split into two groups, and the bicyclist stayed with the smaller crowd. Later, they all converged, and their line of shadows stopped traffic on the 580 for twenty minutes. They created a sad mass of red brake lights, a horde of static whites aimed for the city.

It felt like a victory.

The crowd eventually dispersed, and the bicyclist pedaled back home to Oakland.

Years later, they took the bridge down for good.

A small impromptu party was held, its location and time passed around on Facebook, but mostly no one cared. The last of its steel was hauled to a local junkyard and sold for ten cents a pound.

In the fading twilight of some late November, a man with an ageless face and disheveled suit limped into that junkyard's office.

He grinned as he purchased that entire lot of steel.

Said he had plans to sell it.

Said he could get eleven a pound.

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